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"HE IS THE MAN CHARGED WITH MURDER. DID YOU EVER SEE HIM BEFORE?" DEMANDED BLISTER.

OR,

THE BROADWAY SPOTTER IN THE BLACK HILLS.

A Story of the Wild West.

BY CAPTAIN HOWARD HOLMES,
AUTHOR OF "HERCULES GOLDSPUR," "FLASH
DAN," "DENVER DUKE," "DESPERATE
DOZEN," "KEEN KENNARD,"
ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A COOL HAND.

CUSTER CITY, in the famous Black Hills, was falling into shadow once more, for the sultry summer day was near its close, when a boy of about thirteen entered one of the best hotels of the town and inquired at the desk for a man named Blister.

The clerk, who was busy at the moment of the boy's appearance, did not hear the inquiry, and the little fellow, who was not to be snubbed, elevated his voice in this manner:

"Mebbe you run this hotel, Si Slinkum—or Mister Slinkum, as you'd like ter be called. See hyer, will yer? I've got a letter for Major

May
14
1938

Blister, who ought ter be somewhar about this hash-trap. Whar is he? Walk this way, Si Slinkum; pick yer ears, an' listen."

A laugh at the clerk's expense from several men in the room greeted the boy's remark, and Mr. Slinkum, who was an important-looking official, with a paste diamond and hair scrupulously parted in the middle, turned with a look that threatened to annihilate the messenger.

"Here! give me the letter!" he said, snappishly, reaching a very white little hand out for the letter.

"Not this eve, my cherub of the paste star!" laughed the boy, drawing back. "My orders ar' imperative. I am ter deliver the letter in person. Whar will I find Major Blister?"

"He isn't in."

"Then I'll wait till he comes."

And the urchin, with all the assurance possible, turned away and dropped into the first empty chair that offered its services.

Among those who heard the passage at words between Mr. Slinkum and the boy was a man who was half-hidden by the smoke of a very fragrant cigar. He occupied a chair not far from the clerk's desk, and the moment that Major Blister's name was mentioned he started just the slightest.

This person was about twenty-five years old. He was well dressed in dark clothes which had not seen much service. His hands were well tanned and his face was leathery in color, well-shaped, and more than passably good-looking. His only adornment was a dark-brown mustache which dropped over the mouth, quite hiding it, and further up were two keen gray eyes which at the time had a somewhat animated expression.

If he had not started slightly, nothing would have indicated that the mere mention of Major Blister's name was anything to him. For several minutes afterward he watched like a hawk the boy who was drumming on the floor with his feet, while he waited for the man for whom he had a letter.

After awhile the eyes of the man and the boy met as if by accident, and the latter moved uneasily in his chair. Every few moments he would look up and each time he caught the gray eyes regarding him like the serpent charms the bird.

"That man's got me!" muttered the boy. "I wonder who the old Harry he is? I don't think I could get out of this chair if I wanted ter. Ther next time I fetch a letter ter this appetite factory for Major Blister or anybody else, I want ter be kicked out o' Custer!"

Time and again the boy turned his eyes from the man with the mesmeric look; but some potent influence always drew him back and at last he left the chair.

"I'm goin' ter come back again," he said. "You'll look out ther next time, Quartz Kid. I'll bet Custer ag'in' Flush Bar that thar's not another pair o' eyes like them in ther world."

The boy started toward the door as he muttered the last words, but he happened to glance over his shoulder at the man with the gray eyes. Happened to, did we say? Rather let us remark that some terrible power seemed to draw him to the bronzed stranger, for the eyes were still fixed upon him, and under their influence he stood still.

A moment later he was moving toward the stranger with his eyes set and his lips quivering as if he was cold.

The man with the powerful eyes made a slight gesture toward an empty chair which stood beside the one he occupied, and little Quartz Kid dropped into it.

"You have a letter for Major Blister?" said the man in low tones.

"Yes, sir."

"Give it to me."

Quartz Kid drew back, but not with much force. He had about completely surrendered.

"Yes, give the letter to me," continued the man.

"Will—you—give it—to—him?" stammered the boy.

"Perhaps," and a hand was put forth for the letter which the eyes had already located.

The boy put one hand beneath his short coat and drew forth a small envelope which was taken from his grasp before he could draw it beyond the stranger's reach.

"You can go now."

Quartz Kid let slip a pent-up breath and started toward the door again.

His limbs seemed weak and his face was very pale.

"Who is that wizard?" he gasped, when he reached the sidewalk and halted because he seemed too weak to proceed further without rest.

"What's that, sir?" was asked over him.

Quartz Kid looked up and saw a handsome man whom he remembered to have seen before but where he could not tell.

"Nothin', nothin' at all," he said.

"You look sick, boy."

"I don't feel like a lark, that's a fact," grinned the lad and the questioner passed into the hotel.

The next moment a voice which Quartz Kid easily recognized rung out:

"Hello, major! There was a boy here a minute ago with a message for you!"

The boy started off with a light cry.

"It is Major Blister! He must not know that I gave his letter to another man."

"Where is the boy?" he heard asked.

"Just went out; must be somewhere in front of the house."

The man who had just passed into the hotel turned back toward the entrance. Quartz Kid heard his tread.

"Hello! here he is!" called out a voice behind the boy. "This must be the chap." And the next moment a hand descended upon the urchin's shoulder like a trip-hammer.

"Yes, that's the messenger," said the clerk as Major Blister brought the boy back into the house with triumph in his very dark eyes.

"Where's my letter, boy?"

Quartz Kid looked toward the chair where the gray-eyed man had sat, but it was empty.

"Hand it over," the Major went on. "I'm Major Max Blister, as the clerk will certify. You have a letter for me. Where is it?"

"I've—I've lost it!"

"The deuce you have!" roared the Major who was a giant in dark clothes which did not fit him very well. "By heavens! I'll shake your bones into a heap if you don't produce that letter within two minutes."

"Shake 'im up, Major," urged the clerk, who remembered the laugh Quartz Kid had secured at his expense. "He wouldn't put the letter in my hands for safe-keeping. He ought to be jerked bald-headed for his independence."

Meanwhile, the boy had felt the Blister hand tighten on his shoulder, and, eager to get away by some means, he resolved to tell the truth.

"I was robbed—by the holy stars I was!" he said. "No gammon about this story, Major. I was robbed of that letter in this room."

"That's all fudge," laughed Si Slinkum. "By Jericho! that's a reflection on the house—"

"Let me attend to this case," interrupted Major Blister, giving the flushed and indignant clerk a look that instantly silenced him. "Come up to my room, boy. We'll adjust matters there."

Quartz Kid was willing to do this. He believed that a private interview would tend to mollify the irate Major, and did not object to being taken up-stairs two steps at a time to the big man's apartments.

"Now," said the Major in a softer tone when he had shut the door behind them, "now, my boy tell me about that robbery."

Quartz Kid did not hesitate, but gave a succinct account of the strange theft and accurately described the man who had deprived him of the letter.

He was surprised to find Major Blister listen so coolly to the narration. He expected to hear him interrupt it with fierce expletives and rough upbraidings, but the big man did not say a word until the boy had completely finished.

"Was the man below when we came up here?" asked the Major calmly.

"No, sir; his chair was empty."

"Why, five minutes could not have elapsed from the time you left him till I took you back into the hotel."

"Not three minutes," declared Quartz Kid.

"Who gave you that letter?"

"I don't know. I didn't see the party. It was slipped into my hand in a crowd along with a gold dollar, and a voice said: 'Deliver that in person to Major Blister at the Dolores House. That was all, sir.'"

"Would you know the man who took the letter?" asked Major Blister after a brief pause.

"I would. I've got him photographed on my mind. I'd know him among a thousand, by his devilish eyes."

A faint smile came to the Major's lips but did not remain long.

"Don't be too certain of that," he warned.

"Try me!" exclaimed Quartz Kid eagerly.

"May be you will be tried some day," was the response.

"I'm your huckleberry, Major Blister! I've carried a good many mysterious messages in Custer City, an' I've got a reputation for doin' good work in that line, but I never thought thar war that kind o' eyes in existence. I don't allow anybody to rob me with impunity. I want ter get even with that Satan-orbed galoot. Give me a chance! You board here?"

"Yes. Where do you live?"

"I stay about the 'Happy Pilgrim.' You know whar that is?"

Major Blister nodded.

"Wal, inquire thar for Quartz Kid when you want me. Ef I don't happen ter be in, Boodle Dan will put you on my track."

"All right. Not a word about this transaction," enjoined the man.

"You intend to find who took that letter?"

Quartz Kid saw the eyes of the speaker flash. "Find him?" hissed Major Blister. "We'll find him if we have to rake the wild West with a fine-toothed comb!"

The boy did not notice at the moment that the Major used the pronoun "we" when he spoke, but he was soon to have the fact brought to his recollection by a series of terrible events.

Five minutes later Quartz Kid found himself

on the street again, and Major Blister leaned over the counter and said to Mr. Slinkum:

"Don't mention this little incident. The letter was worthless, and there was no robbery to speak of."

Then he walked out with a fresh cigar bitten half through, and suddenly encountered a man who recognized him at a glance. The two joined and walked along the street for some time without speaking.

"The Old Harry has happened, Perry," said the Major, at last in low voice. "A letter from some one, a mysterious an' important letter, intended for me has been stolen."

The man called Perry looked up with a start.

"Who took it?"

"A man with gray eyes and a dark-brown mustache."

There was no reply, and Major Blister looked down in silence at the person walking at his side.

"Why don't you talk?" he suddenly exclaimed. "In Satan's name, what are you thinking about?"

"The man from New York!"

Major Blister gave a slight start and caught Poker Perry's arm.

"Has he gray eyes?" he asked.

"I cannot say. I never saw him in daylight, you know. We fixed him after dark."

"Look here, Perry," and Major Blister's eyes seemed to look his companion through. "Are you certain you fixed Fred Ferret in New York?"

"I'd bet a million on it!" was the reply.

CHAPTER II.

THE DAGGER'S WORK.

It was a fact well known in Custer City that Poker Perry had no million to stake on any venture, and his offer to bet that amount must be taken as an exhibition of confidence. He spoke with the manner of a man who was thoroughly convinced that he had performed a certain act to the letter of his orders, but it was evident from Major Blister's looks that he, the Major, still had some doubts.

"Whar is this gray-eyed letter-thief?" asked Poker Perry breaking the embarrassing silence that followed his last sentence.

"Somewhar in Custer," was the reply.

"Who sent the letter?"

"I don't know."

The Major's companion shrugged his shoulders but said nothing.

"Go down town and hang about the Dolores," continued Blister. "You will know the man on sight by his strange gray eyes. If I run across the boy, Quartz Kid, I will send him down to keep you company. Do you know the boy?"

"Certainly. Whar will you be?"

"At the old quarters. The letter-thief may come back."

"He'll wish he had not if he does," snarled Poker Perry through clenched teeth. "That man is not Fred Ferret the New York night spy. I know that for no man can escape from the kind o' trap we made for him in tl at city."

"Go," said the Major imperatively. "I've taken your word for the Broadway sport's present whereabouts. Watch for the gray-eyed man at the Dolores. If you find him dog him home, and then report."

"All right."

The two men separated, Poker Perry turned back toward the hotel, and Major Blister kept on. "Whether Fred Ferret is dead or rot, some unwelcome bound has come to Custer," the Major said to himself. "The man who took that letter from Quartz Kid is here for no good. He probably thinks he is stacking the cards against us; but it will prove a death game for him if he ventures to play it through. I can play as well in the Black Hills as in New York, or anywhere else. Wee to the man or men who fights Max Blister on his own ground!"

At a certain spot several squares from the place of separation Major Blister entered a saloon, but took nothing at the bar.

The place was not thronged at tl at particular time, and nobody seemed to notice the big man who passed straight on and disappeared beyond a door at the end of the counter.

Major Blister passed down a dark hall at the end of which he found a stairway which in turn he ascended to a small room. This apartment, had no carpet on the floor, and its only ornament was an oval mirror in a gilt frame which hung above a well-used washstand.

Max Blister took care to shut the door behind him, and as night had fallen upon Custer City, he lit a small lamp and doffed his coat, which he threw on the bed.

Then he went to the foot of the couch and tapped three times on the floor, and several minutes later a cadaverous fellow with a waxed mustache entered the room with a bottle and two glasses on a well-worn tray.

"Sit down there, Gideon," ordered the Major, motioning his waiter to the only unoccupied chair in the room.

The fellow ambled to the seat and smacked his lips as Blister filled one of the glasses.

"I say, Gideon," he went on, "what is your opinion of the Mulberry street traps in New York?"

The waiter started as if a bomb had been

thrown under his chair. The last vestige of color left his face, and the Major smiled.

"I'd rather not express it," was the reply. "I wish I could forget that one night. It has haunted me ever since, for I see that entrapped man in all his agony. May I rot here before I go back to New York. I'd rather talk on another subject, Major."

"I would not," said Major Blister, sternly. "The very subject I have sprung is the one I want to talk about. This is Custer City, thousands of miles from Gotham, and you are safe here, Gideon."

"I don't doubt that! If I thought I wasn't, you wouldn't find me slinging drinks this side of Hong Kong."

"What would you take to go back to New York?"

"About two worlds like this!"

A derisive laugh was the response.

"By Jehu! you're high-priced, Gideon," continued Major Blister, and then he leaned forward and touched the waiter's wrist. "I want you to go back thar!"

"Heavens, no!" gasped Gideon Goldbird, shrinking away as if a serpent had hissed in his face. "What must I go back for?"

"For Major Max Blister," was the slowly-spoken reply. "I want you to look into the Mulberry street trap!"

The listener leaped up and appeared on the eve of flying from the room.

"Sit down and hear me through," the Major went on. "You must remember, man, that an oath, which it is death to break, binds you to me. You must go to New York; you must start before daylight; you must not stop short of the trap, where I doubt not you left the night-spy of Gotham."

"It was sealed up when we left. It hasn't been opened for four years."

"I care not for that. I want to know from you, by actual observation, what is in that chamber now!"

Gideon Goldbird looked at the Major but did not utter a word.

"What kind of eyes had Fred Ferret?"

"Black."

"Are you certain, Gideon?"

"I'd bet my head on it!"

"They could not have been gray?"

"No."

"Well, never mind; black or gray, you go to New York, Gideon."

"Send Perry."

"I want him here," was the answer.

"What has happened?" cried the waiter.

"You don't think that Fred Ferret—"

"I don't think anything. I want to know!" was the interruption.

"He was dead as a herring when we left him."

"I want you to see his skeleton then."

Gideon settled back into the chair with a groan. Fate was against him.

"I think I could find the place," he said; "but they've made some changes in that part of the city since we left, I understand."

"That place remains, and you must find it. I want to make no threats, Gideon; you know the oath you took, and you understand the penalty. I say go to New York and inspect Fred Ferret's prison, then report the truth to me. I may send another inspector, and if he should find that you had played me false in the slightest particular, I wouldn't give much for your continued good health."

"Shall I report in person?"

"First by telegraph. If you find everything all right send only the words 'S ill here'—if the trap should be empty say 'Missing.' This is simple, Gideon, and you will obey."

Major Blister filled the two glasses and handed one with a steady hand to the man who snatched it eagerly and carried it swiftly to his lips.

"I reckon it would do me no good to object to goin' East," observed the waiter. "It is a long journey, and besides, as you know, Major, a certain Gideon Goldbird is wanted by the police in New York."

"If you want to walk into the arms of the first policeman you meet and proclaim your identity, of course you can do so," remarked Blister with a smile.

"I'm no fool!" cried the waiter, his eyes dilating with astonishment. "I'll get in and out of New York without one of them dreaming that one of the old gang has come back."

"You must, for your own safety and for mine. Within one hour everything will be in readiness for your departure. Keep the two messages in your mind, and play your part of this game with shrewdness. I know just how long it will take you to reach New York, and how long also it will take you to find the place and inspect it. I will make allowances for the telegram's time, too. Work to my time, Gideon, or you will find on your track a person worse than all the police of New York."

"I'll work to the minute," promised the waiter, looking down into the keen and glittering black eyes fixed upon him.

"You want to. This is all. Come to this room at the end of an hour."

Gideon Goldbird went slowly down-stairs. He

restored bottle, glasses and tray to their accustomed places and went out.

"New York!" he ejaculated. "I'd sooner be sent to the Cannibal Islands. I am expected to pry into a secret which has been shut up in the worst quarter of the city for four years. Why can't the Mad Major take my word for it? Fred Ferret had black eyes. I would swear to that; so will Poker Perry and the rest. May I roast in Hades if I ever swear to serve another man like this Major Blister. But, it's go to New York and carry out his infernal orders, or be knifed some time when you don't expect it. Hang the luck! I've got to go a thousand miles and more to look in upon the skeleton of the man I helped to kill."

Gideon was in no good humor over the journey and the prospect before him. He cursed Major Blister from the bottom of his heart, and was only deterred from escaping from Custer at once by the terrible threat which had accompanied the orders just received.

More than once Gideon looked behind him to see whether some watcher was not already at his heels. He made his way to a saloon a little more pretentious in outward appearance than the one where he served, and entering, inquired for Quartz Kid.

"Hyer I am, Giddy," said a voice, and Goldbird turned to greet the boy himself.

"The very fellow I want. Let's go to your room, Kid."

Five minutes later the two occupied a small room directly over the saloon and the boy threw himself upon a cot while Gideon took a chair.

"You're in trouble, Gid. What kind ov a ghost war it you struck awhile ago?"

"None, but I'm liable ter strike suthin' afore I get back," answered Goldbird.

"Goin' off, eh?"

"To New York."

Quartz Kid gave vent to a low whistle of astonishment.

"I'm liable not ter come back," continued Gideon solemnly. "Quartzzy, I want you to take possession of a certain paper. If I come back within thirty days, deliver it to me; if I don't, burn it."

While Goldbird spoke he dived beneath his shirt-bosom, and after a little manipulation produced a buckskin envelope, tightly sewn, and extended it to the boy.

"That holds something mighty important," he went on. "If I come back I'm to have it again; if I don't, it's to be burned."

"All right, Giddy," assented the Kid. "Isn't this trip unexpected?"

"Yes. But don't question me any further. I go to New York to-night. Attend to my commands. I ask no more."

The boy had already stowed the packet away beneath his clothing, and a minute later the two left the little room.

Gideon Goldbird disappeared from the saloon, but Quartz Kid retired to a chair in one corner, and settled himself back for a rest. An hour passed, during which time the usual night customers of the "Happy Pilgrim" came and went. Quartz Kid stuck to his chair.

At last one man came in, the sight of whom brought the boy upon his feet.

It was Major Blister.

"I'm on hand, Major," announced the boy, appearing suddenly at the sport's side.

"Ah! here you are, sure enough," was the answer. "I want you. Something important!"

The Major led the way out into the street.

"You told me awhile ago, boy, that you would know the man who robbed you at the Dolores among a thousand," he said.

"I don't go back on that statement, Major."

"Then, I'll give you a trial."

"Have you found him?"

"I hope so. A man named Poker Perry was found murdered near the Dolores, half an hour ago, and a man has been arrested for the crime. I think he's the villain who took my letters."

Quartz Kid looked into Blister's face, amazed at its terrible expression.

"Was Poker Perry your friend?" he asked.

"He was. Come on!"

The Dolores was not far from the Happy Pilgrim resort, and Major Blister, still leading Quartz Kid, soon entered the building.

The reception-room was well crowded with men, but the big sport forced his way through to a smaller room adjoining it, where a human body lay on the floor.

Several men stood near by, and looked at Blister and the boy as they came in.

"There lies Poker Perry," said the Major, halting by the door. "He was stabbed with a dagger with an iron handle. Now, look at the man standing between the two fellows yonder. He is the man charged with murder. Did you ever see him before?" demanded Blister.

Quartz Kid turned and looked at the man designated a full minute, then he shook his head.

"That isn't the man," he decided. "I never saw that one before!"

CHAPTER III.

MARK, THE UNKNOWN.

THE person who had been arrested for the

murder of Poker Perry was a well-shaped man of about forty. He wore good clothes, which had seen a good deal of service, and seemed to be a stranger in Custer City.

In height he was nearly six feet; his shoulders were broad but shapely, and he had black eyes and long hair, the latter escaping from beneath a light-gray sombrero, with a faded blue ribbon for a band. From the first he had taken his arrest without a murmur, and his coolness and nonchalance had puzzled Major Blister and his friends.

He merely said that his name was Mark—he gave no other name, as if he had none to give—that he had but lately arrived at Custer, and intimated that he intended to leave the city in a short time.

When arrested he was in the act of entering the Dolores. He had been followed from the alley back of the hotel, where Poker Perry had been found dead with the iron-handled dagger in his breast, and a spy watched him until the arrest was made.

Major Blister felt certain that the right man had been captured, and that before his victim was cold. He had sent Poker Perry down to the hotel to watch for the man who had robbed Quartz Kid of the letter, and he believed that his pard had found the thief and was following him up or accusing him when killed.

This was the Major's conviction until the boy assured him with much positiveness that he was not the man who had taken the letter. Quartz Kid was certain of this. He had said that he would know the gray-eyed man among a thousand, but Blister had not led him to the right person.

Meanwhile, the prisoner showed no signs of anger, but stood erect between his two guards and took matters with a coolness that was aggravating.

Not twenty feet away, and in the reception-room of the hotel, a number of men were discussing the strange murder. It was no unusual thing for a man to lose his life in Custer, but a cold-blooded assassination like the one just perpetrated was an uncommon occurrence. It was the work of some avenger, who had gone calmly to work.

The men in the reception-room looked in upon the little group in the adjoining apartment, and discussed the question of lynching.

Major Blister, disappointed by Quartz Kid's reply, turned suddenly and walked from the room. He fully expected to hear the boy accuse the prisoner of taking the letter, and such a charge would have satisfied him that Poker Perry's murderer had been found.

Several men came up to the Major the moment he left the smaller room, and plied him with questions.

"The boy doesn't identify him," answered Blister, biting his lip. "I thought he would be able to fasten a certain other charge upon him which would deepen my suspicions, but he does not. The man back there is a mystery. We can't prove, I'm afraid, that he killed Perry."

The crowd seemed to be of the same opinion, although it was plainly seen that the stranger was not above suspicion.

"We kin make Custer too hot to hold him, though," said several in low whispers while they eyed the accused like tiger-cats. "Of course we can't prove ter a dead certainty that he handled that iron-bilted dagger. He hasn't denied it squarely. When told why we held him, he smiled, and merely said we war liable ter hold ther wrong man."

"Thar may have been a threat in thar somewhere," suggested the Major. "I guess we'll have to let him go."

"With orders ter leave Custer within a sartin time?"

"No; give him all ther leisure he wants, but let him be watched secretly all the time."

"That's a good idea, Major. He may have pards; who knows?"

"Watching will develop it."

The men of Custer City often took the law in their own hands, and at the time of which we write a secret Vigilance Committee was in existence.

It was resolved by the crowd in the hotel that the stranger should be set at liberty. There was no proof whatever against him; it was all suspicion, but more than one man who looked furtively at him believed that he had had something to do with Poker Perry's death.

A committee of three waited on the stranger, and made known the decision of the men of Custer. He seemed to take it as a matter of supreme indifference. He acted as though he would have received a sentence of death in the same manner.

"Custer City pledges herself to get at that man's death," remarked the spokesman of the three, pointing to the corpse on the floor, while he addressed the late prisoner. "Poker Perry was no highly respected citizen; but he was one of us all ther same. We can't hold you; we have no proof, but, seein' whar you came from almost before ther murdered man had ceased ter breathe, we had a right ter hold yer."

Mark the Unknown received this with a nod and walked coolly past the dead man and out into the night. Forty pairs of eyes followed him.

Major Blister had already disappeared, but Quartz Kid still lingered and fixed his eyes on the accused when he emerged from the hotel.

Already the spy was at his heels, for he had not advanced twenty steps from the Dolores ere the boy saw a keen-eyed little man following in his foot-tracks.

"I advise that man to get away from Custer as soon as possible," the youngster said. "He won't have a moment's rest while he stays hyer, for nine out o' ten of the men in thar half believe that he knows who cashed Poker Perry's life checks."

Mark sauntered coolly down the street with a lighted cigar between his teeth. He did not seem to have passed through any peril, and looked quite unlike a man whose life had been in danger.

If he had a friend in Custer he did not find him on the street. He nodded to no one, took no notice of his surroundings, and never once looked back to see whether he was dogged by the Vigilantes' spy.

There was something about the demeanor of this man that captivated Quartz Kid. Awhile before he had been charmed by a pair of mesmerizing gray eyes, but now something else, he could not tell what, drew him toward the Unknown.

"I am going to talk to that man," the boy said to himself. "I might as well play detective as any thing else. The death of Poker Perry is a mystery which forty men want cleared up. I know what Major Blister thinks. Anybody who knows what I know can guess his thoughts. He thinks that the man who stole his letter killed Perry, and while I have said that the person ahead is not the letter thief because he hasn't gray eyes he doesn't altogether believe me."

The boy crossed the street and hastening on reached a point ahead of the man, when he crossed to the sidewalk lately deserted, and waited for the man of mystery.

For several minutes Quartz Kid was not rewarded with a glimpse of the one he wanted, but by-and-by he saw him approaching, and kept his eyes riveted upon him.

Quartz Kid bothered his brains for a stratagem for introduction, and when the stranger was almost up to him, he found a half-smoked cigar in his pocket and held it in readiness for his play.

"Will yer accommodate me with a light, colonel?" asked the boy, stepping up to Mark, whose cigar was burning brilliantly.

The man stopped and looked down into the boy's face.

"Certainly," he said. "Hello! you're the boy brought into the Dolores by Major Blister awhile ago?"

"Yes, but I didn't know ye from Adam's off ox, did I, colonel?" laughed Quartz.

"It seems not."

"Kinder close call, hey?" continued the boy, between his puffs, for he had joined his cigar to Mark's. "The Custer City pards stand together in a case like that one, but they caught ther wrong man this time. Ah, thanks!" as the cigar was returned. "Poker Perry must have cheated at ther table. They play bad games hyer sometimes; they set up cold decks too, colonel!"

The faintest semblance of a smile appeared at the corners of the stranger's mouth. Quartz Kid, who saw it, was at a loss to know what it meant.

"Goin' up this way, eh?" he continued, placing himself at Mark's side. "I'm goin' home myself, an' I'll trot along by yer side. Never saw Custer afore to-night?"

"Perhaps not. But, why did Major Blister fetch you to me?"

"Wanted ter see ef I knew yer, I guess."

"But, why should you know me?"

With this question the hand of the Unknown fell lightly upon Quartz Kid's shoulder, and when the boy looked up he saw a pair of searching black eyes fastened upon him.

"They think I know everybody in Custer—I guess that's why Major Blister took me up ter ther Dolores," laughed Quartz. "An' because I know so many, they had an idea that I'd know you."

The boy had not finished the last sentence ere he became convinced that the man knew he was keeping the truth back.

He did not stoop but looked down as he walked erect and kept his hand on Quartz's shoulder.

"See here," he said, in a whisper, every syllable of which was as distinct as if it had been spoken aloud. "I want the truth my boy."

"Jehosephat! What else am I givin' you?" cried the boy, trying to assume an air of injured innocence as he drew back a pace.

"Not very good goods," smiled the Unknown. "Major Blister thought I was the man who took his letter, eh, Quartz Kid?"

The young Custer City messenger almost let slip an exclamation of astonishment. If the hand had not closed on his shoulder at the same moment, he would have broken away.

"Come, my boy, give me the truth. My friend the Major thought he had the purloiner of his letter."

"He did, but—"

Quartz Kid paused.

"Well, go on."

"But that man had gray eyes—the very devil's gray, cold as a fish's; while yours are black."

"If they had been gray, you would have accused me of taking the major's letter, eh?"

"I don't know but that I would," answered the boy honestly. "With the exception of your eyes, you look like him."

"That's a compliment!" laughed the unknown.

"Maybe my eyes change color at will! But see here. I want you to surprise your old friend, the Major. Go back to The Dolores and get the iron dagger that was found in the bosom of Poker Perry; take it to Major Max Blister, the sport of two cities, and tell him to turn the iron handle three times to the right."

Quartz Kid could hardly keep back an exclamation of amazement.

"Will you do this?" continued the man.

"Yes."

"Three turns to the right—remember!"

The boy drew back and found himself free.

"You are not to tell the Major about me until he has turned the dagger-handle," Mark, the Unknown went on. "After that, perhaps you will not be asked for information. You are Quartz Kid. Do this, boy, and I will remember you kindly to your sister."

"My sister? Heavens! I have no sister!" cried the amazed boy.

"Oh, yes you have!" laughed Mark. "Now go and see the dagger-handle turn."

The astonishment depicted on the countenance of the Custer City kid was enough to provoke a very broad smile. He was not permitted to stare long at the strange man, for having closed his last sentence, Mark walked off, leaving him alone.

"I'll carry out his orders," said Quartz Kid. "That is the strangest man that ever struck Custer since I came hyer. If he knows about the iron-handled dagger, he knows how Poker Perry died. The Vigilantes wouldn't have missed it if they had noosed him."

Away went the boy, nor stopped until he reached the Dolores, where the corpse of the Major's pard still lay. In the floor beside it stuck the quaint weapon which had taken life, and Quartz Kid picked it up.

"I know my way to the Major's room," he said. "I want ter see ther handle turn myself."

CHAPTER IV.

THE MYSTERY OF THE DAGGER.

It happened that when the boy entered Major Blister's apartments that the Big Sport was not in.

"Not at home, hey?" exclaimed Quartz Kid, looking about the room. "Mebbe he's out lookin' for ther man who gave Poker Perry ther iron dagger."

While he spoke he looked at the rough weapon he held in his hand. The blade which had a dark stain like that left by blood, was about seven inches in length. From the middle it tapered to a point, which was sharp like the point of a needle. The hilt was of iron not very well finished, but easy to hold when needed for a blow; but Quartz Kid could not see how it would open when turned to the right.

More than once he was strongly inclined to twist it himself, but he beat down this desire and finally stowed it away in his bosom in the condition he had found it.

During his examination of the dagger, the boy stood at a window that looked out upon the street in front of the Dolores, and the light of the lamp hanging above the front entrance, enabled him to see the curious yet rude make of the death instrument.

By the merest chance when he put the dagger away, Quartz Kid looked down into the street, and saw a man whose eyes were fixed on the window. At first the boy thought the look was a casual one, but a moment later he was undeceived.

"That's the man with the devil eyes!" he exclaimed, starting back. "Where is Major Blister? By heavens! we won't let him slip through our fingers this time!"

"Here I am! What's up?"

Quartz Kid whirled to stand face to face with the Sport of Two Cities. He sprang toward him with eyes brimful of excitement.

"He is down there—in the street—looking at the window!" cried the boy, clutching the Major's arm.

"Who?"

"The gray-eyed man!"

"Show him to me."

The pair went to the window together, and Quartz Kid pointed into the street.

"Down there! look!—No! he is gone!"

It was true. The spot lately occupied by the mysterious man was vacant, and a shadow of chagrin and disappointment passed over the boy's face when he saw that the man was gone.

"Let him go," said the Major, with a smile. "We will get him in time. You were waiting for me here, were you not?"

"Yes."

"I heard below that you were up-stairs."

"I have something to show you, Major," con-

tinued the boy, drawing forth the dagger, at the sight of which Max Blister gave a slight start.

"Thar is a mystery about this knife which you are to solve," he went on. "It looks like a common iron affair whose handle and blade are one solid piece. But if you take it and turn the handle three times to the right, it will reveal something."

"Who told you all this?" exclaimed Blister, taking the dagger from the boy.

"No difference who, just now. I find out a few things if I am a kid. Try the dagger, Major."

"I'll light up first."

Major Blister laid the weapon on a stand and lit a lamp; then coming back he picked up the dagger, and looked at it carefully.

"Now for ther mystery, boy," he laughed, glancing at Quartz Kid, whose face was all expectation. "Three times ter ther right, eh? Wal, hyer goes!"

A moment later he turned the iron handle three times, when lo! it dropped off, and a white object about the size of a large bullet fell at his feet.

"A piece of paper!" exclaimed the boy, pouncing upon the object, while the Big Sport stared in amazement at the two pieces of metal held in his hands. "Mebbe this is the letter the gray-eyed Satan took from me!"

Max Blister soon held the little ball of white, and Quartz Kid watched him with dilated eyes while he unfolded it at the little table.

"It's an infernal lie!" burst suddenly from the Major's lips.

"What is?" exclaimed the boy.

"What this paper says."

"What does it say?"

The Custer City gamin was looking over the Sport's shoulder, but one of the big bronze hands, had closed suddenly on the paper, completely hiding it from view.

"No difference what it says—it speaks a lie!" was the answer.

The boy said nothing.

"Who told you that the handle would open by turning it three times?" suddenly demanded Blister, as he wheeled upon the boy and gave him a searching look.

"Turn about is fair play," was the answer. "Show me what the paper says an' I'll give you some information."

"Not unless I do?"

"I'm afraid not, Major."

Max Blister glanced at the door which stood slightly ajar and then at the boy who suddenly and noiselessly got out of reach of his arms.

"Well, here it is. It will not concern you when you have seen it," snapped the Major, forced to give in. "Walk up here and read the paper some fool hid in the handle of the dagger that killed Poker Perry."

The boy stepped forward and leaned over the table. The paper, pretty well straightened out, lay before him in the light of the lamp. One of Max Blister's fingers rested on it at one corner.

For a moment Quartz Kid saw a number of words jumbled together, as if hastily written in a poor light, but he soon read the entire paper, which was written thus:

"I am an iron dagger. I was made to kill five of the greatest villains unhung. One I have just finished. Max Blister, the Sport of Two Cities, knows who the rest are."

This was all. Below these words was a rude representation of a dagger, a very appropriate signature the boy thought.

"Now, who told you about this dagger?" said Blister, when Quartz Kid had barely reached the end of the writing.

"The man you had under arrest a while ago."

"Mark?"

"Yes."

"You know him, then?"

"No, I followed him, and he told me to show you the mystery of the dagger's handle."

"Whar did you leave him?"

Major Blister was on his feet and the paper had been snatched from the table.

"I left him on the street, nearly in front of Faro Frank's place."

"Can't you see that we had the right man?" cried the Sport. "We let Perry's assassin go!"

"It is plain to me now," admitted the lad.

"I'll give him back his iron dagger before mornin'!" the Major went on, catching up the two pieces of metal and putting them together in the boy's presence.

"Hold! I'll write something for the iron post-office—something for that cool devil's pards to see, if he has any."

Max Blister reseated himself at the table, and on a clean piece of paper wrote as follows:

"I am an iron dagger, and in the hands of Max Blister, the Sport of Two Cities; I have killed the man who struck Poker Perry. Let his pards look out!"

"How'll that do, my boy?" laughed the Sport when he had read his work aloud to the boy. "This is blood for blood, blow for blow, and with the same weapon! You don't know me very well yet, but you're liable to know me better if I make Custer City my battleground."

While he spoke he rolled his message into

the form of a bullet and put it back into the hollow of the dagger when he screwed the handle back to its place.

"You left him near Faro Frank's, eh?" he said.

"Yes."

"All right. Not a word to any one about the contents of the dagger handle. I don't want to figure too conspicuously as Poker Perry's pard at the present time. This man Mark, the Unknown, said nothing more when he told you to take the blade to me?"

"Yes. He said that for my trouble he would remember me kindly to my sister when he saw her. What does he mean? I have no sister, and I told him so."

"Wal?"

Major Blister leaned forward with strange eagerness and looked into Quartz Kid's face.

"He laughed and repeated his words," the boy went on, "and then left me to show you the mystery of the iron dagger."

The Sport of Two Cities looked at the youth a moment longer, and then took up the iron weapon without making any reply.

"If they have transferred the battle-ground to the Black Hills, we will fight them to the grave!" he said through clinched teeth, as he moved toward the door. "There must be two of them in town—one with black eyes, the other with gray. One steals a letter intended for me, the other kills Poker Perry with a talking knife. By the saints! we will make it hot for the banded avengers, for that's what the two men are."

He went down-stairs without taking any further notice of Quartz Kid, who was left to follow him at his leisure. He seemed to see everybody in the reception-room at a single glance, and passing through he went into the little apartment where the corpse of Poker Perry still lay on the floor. Somebody had been there since his last visit, for a sheet had been thrown over the dead, and the lamp on the counter close by was burning low.

Major Blister had shut the door behind him, and he now advanced to the corpse and threw back the sheet, so as to expose the marble face and the breast of the dead man.

Lamp in hand, he looked down into Poker Perry's face and hissed forth a terrible oath of vengeance.

"Thar are four of us left, old pard. One has just started for New York. I can call ther other two in from ther mines. If I don't give ther owner of ther iron dagger ther whole length of the blade, may I wear chains in Hades!"

He got up and put the lamp back. At that moment he glanced at one of the windows and saw a face disappear.

"Watched already! By heavens! that war a woman's face!"

He darted from the room, leaving the face of the dead still exposed, and soon reached the street.

"Hello, Major!" exclaimed a voice, and the Sport of Two Cities uttered a wild cry as he beheld the speaker.

"I was just thinkin' about you, Alaric," he cried. "You have come in from the mines just when I need you. Come in here."

He took the bronze giant who had accosted him to the dead room before he could reply.

"Take the lamp and look into that man's face," said the Major pointing to the dead.

They obeyed, but the next moment he sprang back with a wild ejaculation.

"My God! it is Poker Perry!"

"Certainly it is! We must fall upon the man who did this like famished wolves. Did the Night-Owl come with you?"

"That is just what I want to talk about. You wouldn't give me a chance on the street. Night-Owl Oil was found dead in camp, one week ago to-night!"

"Impossible!"

"It is truth."

"Who killed him?"

"Some unknown murderer with an iron-handled dagger."

Major Blister recoiled with a startling cry. His face for a moment was without a semblance of color.

"What became of the dagger?" he finally asked.

"It disappeared from Camp Coyote the same night of the murder."

"Did you see it, Alaric?"

"I handled it."

Major Blister drew the iron dagger from his bosom and extended it toward the man from the mines.

"That is it—the very same knife!" was the cry.

"In Satan's name where did you find it?"

"In the breast of Poker Perry. Don't you see, Alaric—don't you see? The same hand killed 'em both!"

Wild Alaric, as he was called where best known, stared at the mute witness of the double murder like a man suddenly confronted by some terrible thing, as indeed he was.

"This infernal dagger talked," Major Blister went on as his fingers dived into a pocket and produced the paper he had taken from the iron handle.

Alaric took the document carefully and read its contents amid profound silence.

"It is pretty clear to me now," he said suddenly.

"What is?"

"Why the man who came to Coyote the night before the murder killed Oil."

Major Blister seized Alaric's wrist. "Had he black eyes?" he cried.

"No; his eyes were cold gray."

"By the devil's birthright! there are surely two of them!" Blister exclaimed. "One steals letters, the other kills!"

Wild Alaric's answer was a stare.

CHAPTER V.

SPOTTED BY TELEGRAPH.

MEANWHILE, Gideon Goldbird was on his way to New York.

He had left Custer by stage for Sidney where he expected to take the cars over the Union Pacific and by their assistance reach the work-ground.

Major Blister was confident that Gideon would well perform the task assigned to him. He knew his man, and while Gideon had shrunk from the journey when he saw that the orders were imperative, he resolved to carry them out to the letter.

In the same stage that carried Gideon from Custer was a woman who occupied one of the forward corners. She was cast in shadow by her position most of the time, but now and then Blister's messenger caught a glimpse of her face which he noticed was pale but well shaped, and rendered striking by a pair of very black eyes.

It was a new face to Gideon. He had never seen it in Custer, but then he was not a society man, and his duties as waiter at the Gold Queen Saloon circumscribed his observation.

There were seven other passengers in the stage besides Gideon and the strange woman, but they were men with whom he was more or less acquainted. He watched the passenger in the corner with a good deal of curiosity at first for his journey rendered him naturally suspicious, but at length he laughed at himself, and totally forgot her before the stage was many miles from Custer.

In due time we will say without wearying you, reader, Gideon Goldbird had the pleasure of reaching safely the first stage of his trip—Sidney. He alighted with a feeling of relief and wrote a note to Major Blister which he intrusted to the stage-driver who was to deliver it on his return.

Gideon did not think of the female passenger after the arrival in Sidney until she had entirely disappeared.

"I might have watched her awhile any how," he said to himself. "I remember that a strange feelin' passed over me when I first saw her huddled up in one corner of the stage, but I didn't think of her long. I hope I won't be followed on this trip. I don't want any spies on my heels, an', by heavens! I won't have 'em thar long!"

If Gideon Goldbird had placed the woman under espionage after arriving in Sidney, he might have seen her enter the public telegraph office and take up a blank with tapering fingers.

Without a word, she leaned upon the counter and wrote rapidly with few strokes the following message:

"TO JOHN LEOPARD:—

"No. — BROADWAY, NEW YORK:—
"Mr. Gideon Goldbird leaves here for the city at nine to-night. His destination is No. — Mulberry street.

"SELAN."

The operator took the dispatch, counted the words and looked up.

"I will have to have your name if you expect an answer," he said.

"None will come," was the answer, and the young woman paid for the telegram, after which she saw the words clicked away on their long journey.

It was evident that the signature to the dispatch would be understood by John Leopard of Broadway for whom it was intended. The beautiful sender walked from the office with a gleam of triumph in the depths of her fine eyes. She had accomplished a task with which she was thoroughly satisfied.

In blissful ignorance of the message that had been sent ahead of him, Gideon Goldbird rested in a chair on the porch of one of Sidney's best hotels and enjoyed the best cigar that Major Blister's money could purchase. He had had a good time since leaving Custer City for he had fallen in with several old acquaintances with whom he had done the town in true Western style. And now in fragrant smoke, and with the strange woman entirely forgotten, he was resting himself for the long journey ahead.

Night settled down upon Sidney and Gideon was driven to the depot in a stage where he purchased his ticket and declared himself ready to fathom the mystery of the sealed-up apartment in Mulberry street.

While he sat in the depot waiting for the train with his little leather valise at his feet, he did not dream that he was closely watched, and that by eyes that had seen him before.

"I see you are ready for your trip, Gideon,"

laughed the person who regarded the Major's messenger from a point of safety. "You will be surprised at the reception you will meet with in New York. John Leopard will receive you with open arms, and you must be very careful or those arms will close on you like the paws of a bear. You didn't want to go, Gideon, but now that you're in for the trip, you are eager to see Gotham and some of its sights again. Good-by, Gideon Goldbird; if you knew what I know, you'd like to have your fingers at my throat, ha, ha, ha!"

The speaker was the woman who had come down in the stage—the sender of the dispatch, and the person of all persons that night who needed watching by Gideon Goldbird.

As if to reward Gideon's patience, the train came in on time that night, and the thin-faced fellow with the waxed mustache was among the first to take possession of a choice seat.

"Off I am now!" ejaculated Gideon. "It will be a long time perhaps before I see Custer again. All I have to do when I land in New York is to go right to business, an' not go to police head-quarters an' make my presence known. Let me see. I will be Mr. Stephen Selkirk, of Denver. I know that city well enough to play Stephen to perfection. Aha! they don't entrap this weasel from the Black Hills!"

Gideon lighted a fresh cigar and settled himself back in the seat for reflection and a good smoke. He intended to stretch his limbs in a sleeper by and by, but he wanted to enjoy one more cigar before he did so.

"I didn't see our peri get on the train," said a man in the seat behind Gideon.

"The woman who came down in the Custer stage?"

"Yes."

"Oh! she stopped in Sidney. She was in the telegraph office when I went in this afternoon."

A strange feeling took possession of Gideon, and his half-smoked cigar almost dropped from his mouth.

That woman with the strange black eyes in the telegraph office in Sidney? He was growing suspicious again.

He got up and looked back at the man who had spoken last.

"Was she sending a dispatch?" passed his lips seemingly without the least effort.

"Hello! is that you?" cried the man, recognizing Gideon as one of the passengers of the stage. "She wasn't sending any when I went in, but appearances indicated that she was paying for something of the sort."

"She had the blackest eyes I ever saw in a woman's head," said the man who had called up the subject. "I'll bet a thousand that she could look through a fellow with them. She'll make her mark in an affair of some kind one of these days, or I'm no judge of woman-kind!"

Gideon had to be content with the information he had already obtained. He was convinced that the woman had sent a dispatch somewhere, and so great was his curiosity he would have given his last dollar almost to have read it.

"Why didn't I watch her in Sidney?" he exclaimed. "Confound it! I took it for granted that she was not interested in Gideon Goldbird, and like a fool I let her slip. Wait till I come back! By the plated Crown of Hapsburg! I'll know whether that telegram concerned me an' my business to New York."

Gideon at last sought repose in the berth of a sleeper, and was soon oblivious of his surroundings. In dreams, thanks to the potent qualities of the last cigar, perhaps he forgot the black-eyed woman and her telegram.

It is not our intention to follow Gideon Goldbird during his trip to the great city. Day after day the cars bore him along with unvarying rapidity. His traveling companions left him one by one, and when he bade the last one adieu in Chicago he found himself alone.

It was night when Gideon sprang from the train in Jersey City, and hurried on board the ferry.

He looked in good trim for a man who had made the long journey from the Black Hills to New York. He still clung to a good cigar, and his mustache was waxed in a manner that became him gracefully.

Gideon was almost at his journey's end.

Across the ferry on the New York side stood a man who was apparently waiting for the boat. He was an inch or so above the medium height, with a short but full black beard. He was plainly dressed in a close-fitting business suit, with a soft hat of rather wide brim, and an immaculate shirt front. He had rather large eyes, whose color was midway between black and brown, and his hands were incased in dark gloves.

When the boat struck the pier and began to discharge its bustling human freight, this man took a step forward, but glanced significantly at a certain hackman.

Gideon Goldbird was among the foremost people who reached the street, and the eyes of the stranger seemed to single him out without any trouble.

"On time, Gideon," he muttered under his breath, and then he delivered a certain and secret signal to the hackman.

"This way for up-town!" said the Jehu, springing to Gideon's assistance. "Take you to any hotel in the city. Best hack in town, sir. Move right off with one passenger."

Gideon Goldbird did not wait, but walked to the hack, tossed his valise inside, and sprung in after it.

"I guess I'm all right now!" ejaculated the Major's man as the cab rolled away. "It war a long ride, but I'm hyer. What would ther police give ter know that Mr. Stephen Selkirk, of Denver, is Gideon Goldbird, once of this city?"

He did not see the look that passed between the man in gloves and the cabman, as the vehicle moved from the ferry, nor did he hear the exclamation of the person left behind.

If his sense of hearing had been extraordinary, he might have opened the door and leaped from the cab while it dashed up Cortlandt street; but he was congratulating himself over his safe arrival in New York, and again was bothered by no suspicions against any member of the human family.

In due time Gideon was put down in front of one of the numerous small hotels that dot the city, the cabman was paid and dismissed, and there appeared on the register, in a bold but unclerkly hand, the name:

"STEPHEN SELKIRK, DENVER, COL."

"First, a good night's sleep," said Gideon to himself; "then to the business that brought me to New York. To-morrow I'll telegraph to the Major, in care of Sidney, the result of my investigations."

He enjoyed several cigars before he went to bed. For half an hour he aired himself on the streets regardless of the police, and chuckled to himself whenever he thought that everybody believed him to be Stephen Selkirk, from Denver.

Everybody?

Watching him from the shadows of a tree near the hotel stood the man whose eyes had greeted him in the ferry-house, and when Gideon re-entered the building and did not come out any more, this person walked away with an air of satisfaction.

"Safe for to-night, Gideon Goldbird," he exclaimed. "We will see how you get along to-morrow. You have come to the wrong place, I fear, to carry out your master's instructions to the letter."

One thing is certain from all this.

John Leopard, of Broadway, had received the telegram from Sidney.

CHAPTER VI.

THE LEOPARD'S CLAWS.

GIDEON GOLDBIRD slept late the following morning, as if his tedious journey had exhausted him. There was no pressing need for early rising, so that it was eight o'clock when he got down to breakfast.

"The Major is anxious for my telegram, an' I might as well get the business off my hands," he remarked to Stephen Selkirk, from Denver, as he left the hotel feeling ready for almost any adventure. "The old number on Mulberry will not be hard to find, if the trap is still in existence, and four years don't make many changes in that part of the city."

Thoroughly familiar with New York, its light and dark spots, especially the dark ones, Gideon started off to find the place uppermost in his mind.

Already the streets had many pedestrians, but they were all strange to him, although he looked about for some face he knew when he could boast of being a New Yorker.

He reached Mulberry street in due course of time, and after traversing it for some distance, entered a two-story frame house of rather dingy exterior without knocking.

"Hello!" exclaimed a voice in the half-darkened hall in which the man from Custer found himself.

Gideon stopped and looked into the florid face of a very large woman who in tawdry garments presented anything but an elegant appearance.

"Mother Redbird!" he mentally exclaimed. "She still inhabits the trap. I'd like ter know how she's managed to escape the police these four years."

The woman had come forward and was looking into Gideon's face with a faint smile at the corners of her fat lips, and a queer twinkle in her eyes.

"Welcome back to the old haunts, Gideon!" she suddenly exclaimed. "Nobody is gladder to see you than I. How's the Major?"

"Hush!" interrupted Gideon lowering his voice as he clutched the woman's wrist. "I've known the walls of New York to have ears. I am Stephen Selkirk from Denver. I don't know anything about the Major."

"All right. I understand," was the reply. "You are masquerading in other feathers, eh?"

"Yes. I want to see you, Julia."

Mother Redbird as the woman was called led the way to a room adjoining the hall, and shut the door carefully behind Gideon.

"You haven't changed much in four years," she said as she parted the curtain and let a flood

of light upon the Custerite's face. "The police have played merry Harry with the boys who didn't go away. The most of them are residing at Sing Sing, and the cops have been looking for, Gideon Goldbird."

Gideon tried to laugh, but he soon went back to seriousness.

"Are we alone, Mother Redbird?" he asked. "When did I keep listeners?" was the retort in insulted tones.

"Never," said Gideon. "I am here to make a certain examination. Ah, you can guess what it is!"

"No. I am thick-headed this morning. What is it you want, Gid—Mr. Selkirk?"

"I want to look into the place that was shut up one night four years ago. I am here to see about the fate of the man whom we once called Fred Ferret. I am under orders. I have taken an oath to look into the cell. I must do it."

"Wouldn't you take my word?"

"I would, but my oath! You have been here ever since that night?"

"There was no occasion for me to move." "Good! That settles it that he is still here!" exclaimed Gideon. "But I must see for the Major's sake."

"And see you shall," was the answer. Mother Redbird led Gideon from the room to another part of the house. On the way she stopped to get a candle and some matches remarking that they would probably need both within a short time.

At length the woman unlocked a door which opened into a dark room where the candle was lighted after the portal had been closed and re-locked. Then Mother Redbird opened a trap in the floor and motioned Gideon down a flight of steps revealed by the candle's flame.

"The city ferret won't prove very entertaining," laughed the woman. "You have come a long ways, Gideon, to look upon a moldy skeleton. Do you know that it was four years ago this very night when he was fetched here by—aha! I need not name the men. You know all."

Gideon nodded.

"Since then, but a long while since, the bricks in the plastered arch became loose," the woman went on.

"We made them secure, I thought."

"So you did, but time and dampness did the work. Ah! here we are. Look! here is the sealed-up doorway," and Mother Redbird pushed the candle close to a brick wall as she looked up and grinned in Gideon's face.

The man from Custer leaned forward and looked at the bricks for several moments without speaking. He could see the outlines of a doorway which at one time had been bricked up, making what seemed to be a solid wall.

At the foot of it, however, the mortar had fallen away from the bricks, but there was no evidence that any had ever been removed.

"I think we can remove enough of these bricks to enable us to investigate," Mother Redbird said, setting the candle on the ground.

"They are loose, sure enough," and she removed one with little difficulty.

Ten minutes' work by the huge hands of the giantess sufficed to remove enough bricks to enable a man to pass beyond the wall, and with a smile of satisfaction she looked at Gideon who held the candle during the operation.

"The passageway to Fred Ferret is open again," she said. "You will have to go in yourself, Gideon. The hole will not admit a lady of my fairy build. Here; take the candle again and investigate."

Gideon Goldbird seemed to recoil a step when the candle touched his hands. He had reached his goal and stood within a few feet of an object terrible enough to make one's blood run cold. He dared not think what might await him beyond the wall; he was almost ready to see the doomed Broadway detective step from the walled-up cell after his four years incarceration.

"Afraid of the man you helped out of the world?" laughed Mother Redbird, derisively. "Did you come all the way from the Black Hills, Gideon Goldbird, to run from a few dry bones?"

"Give me the light!" exclaimed the man from Custer, as he snatched the candle from Mother Redbird's hand. "By the eternal fates! I allow no woman to taunt me with cowardice."

He stooped and thrust the light into the dark hole and then put head and shoulders through.

A damp smell greeted his nostrils, but he continued to advance. A strange look came to the woman's face while she watched the Custerite disappear.

Gideon was relieved when he could straighten beyond the wall. He picked up the candle and moved it about in order that he might see the whole interior of the place.

All at once a strange gasping cry parted his lips.

"My God!" he cried, retreating toward the opening. "Heavens! the man is living!"

"What's that, fool?" cried Mother Redbird.

There was no reply. Gideon Goldbird had reached the wall and was leaning heavily against it with a ghastly face and eyes that seemed ready to burst from his head.

The old cellar had a living tenant!

"It's the same old trap, Gideon Goldbird, ha, ha!" hissed the man, who had come out of the darkness into the candlelight. "You have come a long ways to inspect your own trap—to get caught in it, too! I think for your own good that you had best have remained at Custer. What is your opinion, Gideon?"

"In Heaven's name who are you?" said Gideon.

"Not the man you helped to wall up in this cellar four years ago to-night—that is certain!" laughed the man. "Guard the entrance out there, Mother Redbird. You know the compact."

A thrill passed over Gideon's frame.

"I have been betrayed!" he murmured. "The she devil is in league with this man!"

"Come, Gideon; we have work to do here," the sport's confronter went on, with the candle in one hand and a revolver in the other. "You have come all the way from the Black Hills to see this walled-up cellar. Major Blister sent you to New York to look at the skeleton of Fred Ferret, the Broadway detective. I want you to tell me what has happened in Custer."

"You ought to know since you knew I war comin' here," said Gideon. "By the holy stars! I'll get my hands on that woman's throat yet."

"Which woman?" quietly asked the man.

"The one who followed me to Sidney and sent you the warnin' telegram."

The reply was a smile which told Gideon that he was right.

He now saw before him a small table and two stools, and at the command of the strange man he dropped upon one of the latter.

"This seems to be a deep, double game, Gideon Goldbird," the man went on. "Now, sir, I want the late startling events in Custer—those events that started you on your journey. I may know more than you think I do. Go on."

Covered by the cocked revolver and watched like a hawk by the cool eyes of his captor, Gideon told all he knew which was not much as the reader knows, for he left Custer City ignorant of the work of the iron dagger.

He was listened to without being interrupted.

"You were to telegraph Major Blister the results of your trip to New York?" said the man. Gideon nodded.

"You were to send a certain message?"

"Perhaps."

"If you found Fred Ferret's skeleton here you were to telegraph—what?"

"Still here."

"If you should find not it?"

"Missing."

"All right," said the stranger with a smile turning to a bit of white paper which, when turned over, proved to be a telegraph blank.

"You will write the message, Gideon."

The man from Custer took up the pencil that lay beside the paper.

"We'll send the first answer mentioned," the cool man said.

"But it is not true. Fred Ferret is not here."

"No difference! You are obeying me now," was the reply. "Write, 'Still here' for Major Max Blister. I will see that the message goes off on time."

Gideon wrote as directed and pushed the paper toward the person who was eying him with an expression of triumph. He saw the dispatch folded carefully with one hand, and deposited in a waistcoat pocket.

"Now, Mr. Goldbird, I will leave you to your reflections," continued the man.

"In this hole?" exclaimed Gideon springing up.

"Why not?" laughed the man who had stepped to the opening. "Four years ago you helped to wall up a fellow-being in this Black Hole. It is only the vengeance of time, Gideon. This is one of the houses of New York from which no noises escape. You know this as well as I do. You have obeyed Major Blister, the Sport of Two Cities too well for your own good perhaps. Are the boys all well? How are Pook Perry, Night-Owl Oil and Wild Alaric getting along? And the Major himself? Good-by, Gideon. When Max Blister gets your dispatch he will breathe freer and thank you for a faithful performance of duty. Aha! good-night!"

The speaker stooped, and passed quickly through the opening.

For a second Gideon stood spellbound in the center of the cell, then with a horrifying cry of rage and despair, he leaped forward.

"If you attempt to come out you will lose your brains!" said a stern voice. "This game in New York belongs to the one that is to be played in the Black Hills. Go back to your table, Gideon Goldbird, and think of the man seized at midnight four years ago, and walled up in this cellar. This trap sends out no sounds, you know. A yell will die within its walls. Meet your fate like a man, my red-handed Custer sport. You'll never get to choke the woman who prepared me for your reception!"

Gideon Goldbird fell back with a nameless shudder along his bones. The candle disappeared and he heard a voice say:

"This is the first one of the five!"

Then his senses seemed to swim and he turn-

ed in the darkness toward the table. All at once his limbs lost their strength, and striking one of the stools he fell forward in a swoon.

CHAPTER VII.

QUARTZ KID'S "DISCOVERY."

"It is strange I never had a second letter sent me by the person who sent the one the gray-eyed man took. Here a week has passed since the theft was followed by Poker Perry's death by the iron dagger. No dispatch yet from Gideon. I give him till to-morrow night."

"The regular stage is due now."

"Yes. If the telegram does not come to Sidney in time to catch it, it is to be brought up by special messenger at my expense. I have arranged all that."

The speakers were Major Max Blister and his pard Wild Alaric, and they occupied the little room over the saloon to which Gideon Goldbird had been attached in the capacity of waiter and general utility man.

The sun was dropping behind Custer City, and the regular stage from Sidney was due with its usual adventuresome load.

The mystery of the iron dagger had not been solved, and the Sport of Two Cities had it still in his possession. At the moment we reintroduce the pair to the reader the quaint but terrible instrument of death lay on the little table before them.

The man called Mark the Unknown had quietly disappeared and Quartz Kid, who had played detective to the best of his ability, had failed to find any traces of him or of the gray-eyed man who had stolen the letter.

While the two worthies speculated on the singular events that mystified them the stage from Sidney rattled by in a cloud of dust, and Major Blister muttered an exclamation of gratification.

"Something at last perhaps," he said. "Now we will wait. If a message has come the clerk at the Dolores will fetch it up here in person. Ten minutes will determine it, Alaric."

Five minutes did so.

At the end of this time a low rap sounded on the door, and Blister sprung up to open it and greet the somewhat dudish face of Mr. Si Slinkum, clerk of the Dolores. The young man extended a light brown envelope which the Major clutched eagerly, and bore back in triumph to his companion.

"There's gold in Gideon yet!" he said, as he tore the envelope open. "He didn't want to go—long trip, you know—but when I made it a command he never growled. Ah! here we are."

Just then the Sport drew the telegram forth and spread it open on the table.

"Still here.—GIDEON!" he read aloud, and then turned to Wild Alaric, with a laugh. "What do you say now?" he went on. "You say that Fred Ferret had gray eyes; so has the man who robbed Quartz Kid of the letter."

"I stick to it."

"But Gideon says that the Broadway detective still inhabits the cell under Mother Redbird's trap."

"I can't help that. I am the only one of the boys who saw Fred Ferret in the daytime. I marked his eyes particularly. They were gray. If I ever see them again, I will know them."

"But they've quit shining! That dispatch says so!" exclaimed the Major, striking the paper as he finished.

Wild Alaric picked up the dispatch and looked it over word for word, then he dropped it and took up the iron-handled dagger.

"This ugly thing killed Night-Owl Oll in Camp Coyote an' Poker Perry in Custer. At one place a gray-eyed man was seen; at the other a man with black orbs."

"Yes, yes!" cried the Major, leaning forward. "How do you reconcile them?"

Wild Alaric slowly shook his head.

"I tell you," he said, suddenly letting the dagger fall, "we must hunt those two men beyond the limits of Custer. Many days have passed since the two terrible blows dealt by that outlandish knife. It disappeared mysteriously after the killin' of Night-Owl Oll, an' the next I heard of it, it was in Perry's bosom. I am not hyer to doubt the truth of that dispatch. It came from New York. Gideon ought to know what he talks about; he is on the ground."

"He has seen the skeleton of the Broadway Spotter," said the major.

"Granted. He will confirm the dispatch when he comes back. Was he to follow it soon?"

"Right away. He is on the road now."

"As I have said, these two men, the one with black an' the one with gray eyes, must be looked for beyond Custer," continued Alaric. "We have searched every hole and corner for them hyer."

"Do you think they are working together?"

"I—I do not know," said Wild Alaric doubtfully. "There must be a third party somewhere—the person who sent you that one letter by Quartz Kid."

"I'd give a thousand to know its contents!" exclaimed Major Blister.

"Perhaps it was a letter of warnin'."

"From whom?—against whom?"

Wild Alaric laughed.

"Time or that iron dagger will tell," he said gayly. "Since last night, Major, I have been tryin' to get at this mystery. Somebody is on our track, that is as certain as fate. There are two deeds, which to speak plainly, need avengin'—first the Delancey affair in New York, next the treatment of Fred Ferret in Mother Redbird's trap. That Broadway Spotter made it so hot for us, you know, that we had to turn on him, an' finally leave the city. He was slowly but surely clearing up the Delancey mystery. He had an interest in it."

"Yes; there was five thousand dollars' reward."

"His interest was greater than money," said Alaric. "Ralph Delancey had a daughter."

"A young girl who was away at school when it happened."

Wild Alaric nodded.

"That girl came to New York after the robbery, an' shortly afterward, an' before we entrapped Fred Ferret, disappeared. Delancey had also a brother who came back after a ten years' stay in India, the day after the affair. I believe we never saw him."

"I never did," said the Major. "He kept himself secluded. But what are you going to make out of this recollection? Are you tryin' to figure out, Alaric, that one of these two strange men who appear to be on our track, is this Delancey?"

"Draw your own conclusions," said Alaric, with a smile. "We have been found by two men who are workin' against us, one with an iron dagger, the other, thus far, with bare hands. We've got to turn an' fight, Major," and the speaker's hand slipped across the table like a serpent and seized Major Blister's wrist, while their eyes met. "Thar is something devilishly unpleasant in bein' hunted by an instrument like that iron dagger," he went on. "Night-Owl Oll knows what it is, so does Poker Perry. When it comes down it kills. It has found us at last, Major; thar war five ov us a little while ago; now we ar' three, an' one is two thousand miles away. I'm for takin' the offensive. I'm for takin' up arms ag'in' this iron dagger and its wielder—ag'in' all who hound us to-night. You an' I have been cool an' terrible men before now. We can be thus again. You've got to give up your love affair for a few days. Yes, you've got to think very little of your little Cleopatra for a while. Can you do that, Major?"

"By heavens! I can do anything," said the Sport of Two Cities, through his clinched teeth. "By some avenger we have been found. It is vengeance for the doom of Fred Ferret, or blood for the Delancey affair."

"That is certain," nodded Wild Alaric.

"I wish we knew for certain which it was," the Major went on. "The two men, whoever they are, may be working together."

"If they are they must be met an' thwarted," grated Alaric. "Let this play—this wild West drama—be called the play of four desperate men, you an' I, Major, an' the man with black eyes, an' he with gray."

Major Blister caught up the terrible suggestion and burst into a coarse laugh.

"By Jehu! we'll make it such to somebody's cost, Alaric!" he exclaimed. "Come! let's go below an' seal our resolve in a glass. I'm as dry as a fish out o' water. I'll let the Dakota Cleopatra go for a spell, but I must see her before we turn on these two hunters."

"Not for long, Major."

"For ten minutes," laughed the Sport.

Three minutes later the two men stood side by side before the bar in the bar-room below.

The place was almost deserted, and even Quartz Kid was not in his chair in his accustomed corner.

Twice they drank discomfiture to the terrible enemy then on their track, and suddenly Major Blister turned to Alaric and exclaimed, in a whisper:

"The dagger! we left it on the table upstairs!"

"I will get it," and away Wild Alaric went, disappearing in a moment.

The Major waited a minute, and then the man from the mines burst into the room.

"It is gone!" he said in a low voice, that made the Major recoil a step.

"Gone—the iron dagger?"

"Gone! thar war nothin' on the table but this piece of paper. The person who took the blade left it behind."

Major Blister snatched the paper from Alaric's hand and went toward the lamp at the end of the counter, where, with distended eyes, he read:

"I will see you later, gentlemen!"

"THE IRON DAGGER."

"Great Heaven!" cried Blister, looking at Alaric. "The same thing that happened at Camp Coyote has happened here—the dagger has been stolen. Come up-stairs."

Wild Alaric followed at his pard's heels, and the two men re-entered the little room over the bar.

"The thief didn't come up the steps," Major Blister said. "He entered at the window. See! it looks down over the sloping roof. He came in here; there is no doubt of it. He was watch-

ing us all the time. The avenger of blood is in Custer City at this moment; he—"

At that moment the door flew wide open, and the boyish figure of Quartz Kid bounded into the room. The two men sprung toward him at the same moment.

"Well, I've made a diskivery at last," said the boy. "Thar's a woman in the case."

"A woman?" echoed the two pards.

CHAPTER VIII.

FIVE HUNDRED TO TEN.

WHILE Major Blister might have suspected that a woman was in some way connected with the dark work of the iron dagger, the announcement made by Quartz Kid sent a thrill through him. His companion, Wild Alaric, was no less astonished, and the boy found himself confronted by two excited men.

In less than a minute Quartz Kid had been dragged to the table, and made to take a seat on one of the stools.

"Now, give us the whole lay-out," said the Major. "You have discovered that there is a woman in the case, eh? Go on!"

"Give a fellow a chance ter catch his breath, won't yer?" exclaimed the boy. "I'm not used ter hev'in' my diskiveries jerked out o' me in this manner. I made ther last one without resortin' ter thet means, an' I don't count myself much ov a detective, either."

Much against their will, the two men were obliged to let Quartz Kid take his own time, and this he did with aggravating leisure.

"You see," he began at last, "I've suspected a certain woman bein' up ter something mysterious in Custer for some time. She went down ter Sidney in the same stage that took Gideon Goldbird off, an' came back in the next one. While thar she went ter the telegraph office an' sent off a dispatch. Kinder curious, wasn't it?"

"Hades an' horns! I should say it war!" exclaimed the Major. "Did you go down in that stage?"

"No; we went ter see Poker Perry's corpse that night, you know. But I reckon I had a friend over ther stage-wheels all ther same. Well, since that woman came back I lost sight ov her until a little while ago. I saw her with the man who war arrested for killin' Perry."

"Is he in Custer?" and the Major's hand closed on the boy's arm.

"Yes."

"That's all we want to know about your discovery, Kid. Show us this man."

"To-night?"

"Right away! He an' this woman are leagued together, but by the eternal heavens! we'll break their bands!"

"What is this woman like?" asked Wild Alaric. "Describe her to me."

"As women run nowadays, she's pretty," said Quartz Kid. "I never saw such eyes."

"Black?"

"Black as midnight, an' full ov fire! I wonder that Gideon didn't suspect anything on the way ter Sidney. He must have seen her, for she was in the stage."

"The fool! he saw nothing," grated the major, madly. "He must have been asleep. But go on an' tell us what she is like."

"She has a medium-sized figure, a good face, and the whitest an' prettiest hands I ever saw on a woman."

"Young?"

"Perhaps twenty."

Wild Alaric gave Major Blister a quick look as he said:

"That would be about her age now."

The Major turned to the boy again.

"Where did you leave her?"

"In a certain room with Mark the Unknown, as Custer calls him since his arrest."

"Come an' show us," said Alaric. "If you have solved the mystery, Quartz Kid, we'll load you with dust. I am eager to look into the face of the man who was held awhile for the death of Perry."

A minute later the two desperadoes and their young guide were on the street below. They had looked to their revolvers and found them all right, and the boy saw a terrible expression of determination on the Major's face.

"This woman is goin' ter give these two sports trouble—I know it," he said to himself. "She didn't go down to Sidney in that stage by accident. She went because Gideon went away, an' I'll bet my head that her dispatch beat the old fellow ter New York. I'm not so anxious to find the man who war held for Poker Perry's murder as I am to see ther Satan-eyed person who mesmerized me out o' the Major's letter. But mebbe the two ar' connected in some manner. I believe the Major thinks they ar'."

Quartz Kid guided the two sports through several streets of Custer and stopped at last in front of a small frame house that stood back from the sidewalk a few feet.

"I've watched that house for three days an' nights," said the young detective in a whisper. "It is one o' the few buildings in Custer thet have shutters. Ha! thar is still a light in the room whar I left them. Come this way."

He led the men to a closed window on one side of the building, and touched the shutter.

"Look in thar," he said turning to Major Blister. "The peep-hole is not large, but it let me see all that I saw."

Flushed with eagerness, the Sport of Two Cities stepped forward and applied his eyes to the place designated by the boy. For several moments he saw nothing definite, then he recoiled all at once with a light cry.

"We have run him down!" he said. "Look in thar, Alaric, and spot the man seated at the table. It is Mark the Unknown."

Wild Alaric was not slow to obey the commands of his master. He sprang to the window and looked into the house.

"Is that Mark?" he asked when he turned to Major Blister again.

"It is the man whom we arrested for killin' Poker Perry."

"It is not the person who came to Camp Coyote the night before the iron dagger killed Night-Owl Oil. That man had gray eyes, an' besides he was not so large as the person in thar."

"Thar ar' two of them—we know that now," said the Major. "The man in thar is Mark the Unknown. I'll wager my head thet he never left Custer. He has made this house his home ever since Poker Perry died."

"I should not wonder. What is to be done?"

"He must be cornered!" cried the Major.

"In this house?"

"Whar he is! Remember that we ar' playin' a desperate game."

"I never forget that!" said Wild Alaric between his teeth. "Whar is the girl? Quartz Kid saw her with the man in thar awhile ago. Heavens! she has joined him now. Look in thar, Major. Thar's ther woman thet is in this case."

Alaric stepped back and gave his master a chance to see the young woman who had joined the man at the table. Major Blister applied his eye to the shutter and looked for a minute.

"So that is the woman who went to Sidney in the same stago that took Gideon down!" he ejaculated. "She is a beautiful creature, by my life! Rouse her, an' you'll find a tigress in your front. Thet's my judgment of thet Black Hills Cleopatra. They look alike! Did you notice the resemblance, Alaric?"

The pard from Coyote nodded.

"We have but ter drop the word in Custer that Mark the Unknown is back, ter have this shanty surrounded by a mob of cool men," the Major went on. "Custer now believes thet we let the right man go thet night. I've worked up a cool case ag'in' him since th'n. I hev painted Poker Perry in colors that don't exactly b'long ter him, an' Custer wants blood. Thar's nothin' like workin' up a sentiment, Alaric, when it's ter one's advantage ter hev it worked up. I am goin' ter fetch ther Vigilantes of Custer down upon ther man in thar."

Major Blister spoke with a resoluteness that made his eyes flash.

"I don't want him ter see my hand in it at first," he went on. "We must deal with these two men one at a time. Alaric, you an' the boy will watch this house. I will rouse ther Custerites."

Major Max Blister glided away, and left Wild Alaric and Quartz Kid to watch the house. He went direct to the Dolores, where he confronted a handsome man who was smoking in a chair, and apparently waiting for something to turn up.

"Well, our man's come back!" whispered the major.

"Mark?"

"Yes."

The Custerite left the chair, looking into Blister's face.

"Do you know where he is?" he asked.

"I've got watchers on the spot now."

"That's enough," was the reply. "If you will wait for me here I'll have the boys ready in ten minutes."

"I'll be hyer!"

Major Blister saw the man leave the hotel, and his eyes followed him with a triumphant gleam.

Everybody knew Claude Cressy, the captain of the Custer City Vigilantes. A sport himself, gambler, miner and genteel rough, he had swung the noose all over golddom and it was he to whom Custer owed her better days when scenes of bloodshed were few. He was no man's confederate, played no dark games; he took pride in putting down violence, and at times, it is said, used the noose with too much haste. He picked out his men, his Vigilantes, wherever he was. He knew the material he wanted, and he was never at a loss to find it in the gold and silver camps of the West.

Major Blister saw this man leave him with the assurance that he would soon return with the men who had on more than one occasion restored quiet to Custer. He was not mistaken. One by one stern-looking men dropped into the reception-room of the Dolores. For the most part, they wore dark shirts and had their pants in their boots. Max Blister knew them all—they were Claude Cressy's avengers of blood.

When one dozen had dropped in quietly the Major felt a hand on his arm and he looked into the face of the captain of the Vigilantes.

"We ar' ready," said Claude coolly. "Now

show us the whereabouts of this man who slipped through our fingers a week ago."

The Sport of Two Cities was only too eager to show the Vigilantes to the house watched by Alaric and Quartz Kid. He believed that he was about to solve the mystery of the iron dagger; at any rate Mark the Unknown, and its undoubted owner, had been run down and that was enough.

"Come with me! I'll show you this cool devil!" he said to Claude. "I don't want my hand to appear in this arrest at present."

"It shall not," said the Vigilante with a smile. "Only show us our man."

The eager men had already reached the front of the hotel and Major Blister was about to lead the Vigilante away, when the clerk called to him.

"There's a letter here for you, Major. 'Pon my soul I nearly forgot it."

"A letter?"

Max Blister felt the words come to his lips without effort as he started toward the man who was holding up a letter between thumb and finger.

"Who delivered it?" he asked as he took the message.

"I can't tell you, Major, I found it lying on the register awhile ago."

Major Blister looked at the envelope with eagerness mixed with considerable suspicion.

"By Jehu! thar was no gray-eyed man to steal this letter!" he exclaimed.

Then he tore the pocket open and drew out a little piece of paper.

"Short and sweet, Major," laughed the clerk.

The Sport said nothing but held the paper up in the lamp-light and read:

"Five hundred dollars to ten, Major Blister, that you'll feel the iron dagger between your shoulders inside of ten days. Will you take the bet?"

That was all.

"Yes!" thundered Major Blister in tones that startled the Vigilantes beyond the door. "By heavens! I'll take twenty bets of that kind. I'm not to be frightened by a threat like this. Five hundred ter ten, oh? I'll reverse the wager. Whar's Captain Claude?"

"Here!" said the Vigilante stepping forward.

"Some infernal fool wants ter bet me that I'll feel the iron blade between my shoulders inside ten days," cried the Sport. "I want you ter bear witness, cap'n, that I take the bet. Now, sir, if you'll follow me I'll show you the fool who sent this letter hyer. I can do it!"

Crushing the message in his hand Major Blister strode madly to the door and threw himself before the dark-shirted men of Custer.

"So that is Major Max Blister?" said a man who reached the clerk's desk as the Sport struck the walk.

"That's the Major. He's got a strange bet on his hands this time."

"Yes and one he will lose!" was the muttered answer as the inquirer walked away, and carried off a steely glitter in his strange gray eyes.

CHAPTER IX.

IN THE TOILS.

UNDOUBTEDLY there was "a woman in the case."

If Gideon Goldbird, at that moment the tenant of an underground dungeon, hundreds of miles away, could have seen the young woman who stood beside the man in the little shuttered house in Custer City, he would have recognized her.

She was the identical person who occupied the darkest corner of the stage during his journey down to Sidney—the woman who had signed "Selah" to the dispatch which had preceded him to New York.

There was a striking resemblance between the woman and her companion; they both had black eyes and their faces seemed to have been cast in the same mold.

Neither suspected that they were watched; there was no thought of Quartz Kid and the men he had led from the saloon to the closed window.

The man who sat at a little table, upon which lay an object, carefully wrapped in paper, looked up into the face of his companion, and asked more than one question with his eyes.

"No," said the girl, with a smile, "I had no trouble getting it," and her eyes fell upon the paper-wrapped article. "They left the room together, and I had but to raise the window, spring into the room and seize it."

"Many thanks, Adele."

"It is a terrible-looking thing."

The man smiled grimly.

"It does the work. It is the agent of vengeance," he said. "It is no respecter of persons. It kills in camp and in city. Ah, the fools! they had me once. They had me in the presence of Poker Perry, my last victim; the knife was sticking in the floor at his side; but I walked off coolly, for they could not get the boy to identify me."

"As the man who took the letter from him!" exclaimed the girl. "Major Blister wanted to bring the two deeds together."

"He can't do that, Adele," was the quick answer. "I am not the man with gray eyes.

See! mine are black." And he lifted his bright black orbs to Adele as if for inspection. "Is there no way to get the field clear for us?"

"What do you mean?"

"Can we not send this other vengeance-hunter back to New York or somewhere else?"

"I am afraid not, Mark."

"Then we must work fast. He will do more than take letters if he suspects that I am at work to exterminate this league of two cities. The message you sent John Leopard will cause him to hold Gideon Goldbird. That man's blood ought to be vengeance enough for them. The Broadway detective did not suffer as we have."

"He suffered a hundred deaths, he says," said the girl.

"Perhaps. If there is a place in New York more horrible than the dungeons of hell, it is beneath Mother Redbird's infamous trap. But you know what we have endured, Adele," the man laid his hand on the girl's wrist. "To wipe out this league of five, I would go to the uttermost ends of the earth—I would endure, if possible, a thousand deaths. Think of it. I had just come back after an absence of years—"

"Say no more," exclaimed the girl, drawing back with a perceptible shudder. "Don't let me recall the horror of that one black night in my life's history. I know who are responsible for it—that is enough! I have sworn to help you in this scheme of vengeance. Let that suffice. Even to this day a cold shudder takes possession of me when I think of that crime."

"No more then if it pains me," the man said, pushing back his chair and putting the paper-covered article into an inner pocket. "I am going down-town to see this fine-feathered Custer peacock in his head-quarters. I wonder if he has heard from Gideon Goldbird?"

The girl said nothing. She stepped back and looked at the man, and while she gazed her eyes seemed to glow with admiration for he was a handsome dark-faced athlete who would command attention anywhere.

"Do not be gone long," she suddenly said, springing to his side.

"You are not afraid, Adele?" he answered.

"Not afraid, but there are two against you now. Major Blister has been joined by Wild Alaric, the desperate of the desperate—the man who brought him news of Night-Owl Oil's fate at the hands of the iron dagger."

"Ah! never fear for me!" laughed Mark the Unknown, throwing one arm tenderly about the girl and drawing her gently to him. "When I am no match for Major Blister, and his pard, I will drop the coil of death, and go back to the Indian jungles. Fear not for me, Adele, ha ha, ha!"

The next moment the man released the young girl and went to the door.

"Hark!" exclaimed Adele, clutching his arm. "We have been found at last."

Mark stopped and threw a look toward the door after the manner of a tiger brought suddenly to bay.

"It is true. There are men outside," he said.

"They are on the porch."

As she spoke the last words, Adele threw herself between Mark and the door.

The man's black eyes flashed suddenly with defiance and his hand darted forward to push the girl aside.

At that moment a quick step reached the door from the outside—and the next instant a light rap sounded in the room.

"I will open it. Stand back!" said Adele in a resolute whisper.

Her hand was already on the knob, and turning the key quickly in the lock she opened the portal.

"Good-night, miss," said a voice. "Sorry to trouble you at this hour, but business is business. We have business with the gentleman who is with you just now—Ah! thar he is!"

At that moment the speaker who was Claude Cressy, the Custer City Vigilante, caught sight of Mark standing by the girl, and he immediately turned his attention to him.

"I am here," said Mark the Unknown stepping past the girl and presenting his splendid figure in the lamplight to Claude and his backers.

"We have determined to take you into custody again," said the captain of the Vigilantes.

A strange smile began to play with Mark's lips, and the girl who looked up into his face expecting to see it a trifle pale, saw only the old light in his eyes.

"As you choose," he said coolly. "May I ask what the charge is?"

"The old one—the killing of Poker Perry."

Adele kept back with difficulty an exclamation of horror. Mark noticed it, and touched her slightly.

"Keep cool," he said in a low whisper.

"This is a part of the game against us—that is all."

Then he looked over Captain Claude's shoulders and saw his dark-shirted men.

"I understand. You are the acknowledged Vigilantes of Custer," he said.

"We are the men who sometimes administer the law here," was the reply. "There are several things which you must explain satisfactorily to this body of men," and Claude Cressy

waved his hand toward his followers. "But this is not the place for such explanation."

"Show me to it, then," said Mark.

The Vigilantes drew back a pace as the accused stepped upon the porch.

"Show me my new accusers," he exclaimed sending a piercing look through the crowd.

"In time, in time," was the reply.

A moment later Mark left the porch and met the Vigilantes who closed silently, but respectfully about him, and looked to Captain Claude for orders.

"Is it to end thus?" exclaimed Adele drawing back from the sight with pallid face. "Merciful heavens! am I to be left alone here by the noose of the Vigilantes of Custer? Is he to die with our oath but half-fulfilled? They will give him no chance—they never do here, I am told. Claude Cressy believes every man guilty; the noose has made him merciless!"

She was alone in the room, and the door had shut upon Mark and his bronzed guards. She did not see the pair of black eyes at the window, nor the figure crouched like a tiger at the sill.

"Quartz Kid was right. That woman has much to do with this game against us," said this person. "She is Mark the Unknown's pard, and ten to one that her hand brought back to him to-night the iron dagger. What a beauty she is when her eyes flash as they're flashing now. I am going to face her. Captain Claude and his pards are bound to hold the man they have just marched away, and I will interview this blood tigress from the East."

The man who was Major Blister left the window and sprung upon the porch. He was eager to reach the girl left behind by the Vigilantes; his face was flushed with excitement and his eyes fairly blazed.

His first rap started the beautiful Adele; she was at the door in an instant.

"Can it be that they have released him already?" she said, to herself, and then she opened the door to see the Sport of Two Cities standing in the lamplight.

"Major Blister, I believe?" she said, strangely calm in a second, but with a singular gleam in the depths of her eyes as she held the door open. "You wish to see me else you would not be here. Come in, Major."

Puzzled by her suavity and coolness, the Custerite walked in, the door was closed behind him, and he found himself face to face with the unknown girl.

"Your friend has left you," he said, and then before she could reply he took a step forward and looked almost fiendishly into her face.

"Thar's no use beatin' about the bush," he went on. "They call you Adele; you are the confederate of the man who carries the iron dagger. You have followed him hyer to help him use it against five men—two of whom are already dead—killed by it. You went to Sidney as the shadow of one of my men a week ago—you sent ahead of him a certain dispatch to a certain man in New York. You are hyer playing the role of blood tigress against one of the most desperate men that ever threw an ace—Major Max Blister. The hero of the iron dagger is going now to his doom. The hand that finished Poker Perry and Night Owl Oil will never strike again. The letter he sent ter ther Dolores saying that he'd wager five hundred ter ten that I'd feel that infernal bowie between my shoulders inside o' ten days we'll make a lie ter all Custer afore morning. Look me in the eye, girl, and tell me who you really ar'. By the flames of Tartarus! I'm ther wrong man ter play against. Whar's ther dagger you took from my room awhile ago?"

Adele drew back from the face that almost touched hers.

"Not so fast my white pantheress," cried the Major, and his hand darted at her wrist. "Open your mouth to cry for help, and I'll introduce you to a silken hand whose clutch is terrible!"

The girl still recoiled, and the next moment she placed the table between her and the Sport by a dextrous spring.

"Now my crimson-dyed Satan," she said, with a victorious laugh, "we will have an interview, but I will be the questioner. Stand where you are! At the first move on your part, I will end your trail in this room. Yes, I am Adele; I am bound to hate five men living or dead, while I have life. If the Vigilantes of Custer take the life of the man they have marched away, I will take yours! The iron dagger will perform its mission even though its possessor leaves the trail. Aha! don't you know me, Major? Look at me well."

The girl leaned forward, a silver-mounted revolver in her hands, and smiled in the desperado's face.

CHAPTER X.

A MAD DESPERADO.

THE Sport of Two Cities found himself in the power of one whose demeanor told him that she would not hesitate to carry out the threat just made. He saw that he had encountered Adele at the wrong time, and her laugh rung strangely in ears unused to it.

"We will wait here for a report from Mark and his captors," said Adele. "As I have told

you, Major Blister, if his life is taken by the Vigilantes you will drop dead where you stand. Have patience. The report will come soon."

The man of Custer bit his lip and looked into the woman's face.

"Did you think I would lose sight of you?" suddenly asked the girl. "New York is many miles from the Black Hills, but distance and disguises are nothing to me. Why, I have been at your heels for a year, Major. Other eyes looked after your pards, but I took care of you. I knew all the time that the iron dagger had been made—I saw it fashioned, with the movable handle and the double edge. It was made for five men—all friends of yours. It has found the hearts of two; the others shall not escape!"

Major Blister growled something like an oath, and then raised his hand.

"If you think you can carry out your work, go ahead!" he said, between madly shut teeth.

"This is a game at which more than one can play. You may cash my checks on death's counter, girl, but there are others."

"Wild Alaric and Gideon Goldbird?" cried Adele.

"More than those!" was the answer.

"A league, eh?—a league formed since you left New York? Would you have me believe this? I am not to be driven back by a threat. The league you hint of is a myth. You forget that I have watched you for a year. No, Major Blister: threats will not dull the point of the avenging knife. Aha! my messenger is coming!"

At that moment the door behind the city sport was opened gently, and a bit of paper fluttered forward and fell upon the table before Adele.

Max Blister started forward and watched her narrowly, while she opened it with one hand.

"They are very anxious to have you at the accusation," she said, glancing up at her prisoner. "I am going to let you go. Remember, if the blood of Captain Cressy's prisoner is shed to-night, yours will flow before sun-up. There is to be no child's play in this game, Major. You will go down and face Mark the Unknown, as you call him; there may be a rope about his neck even now. If it tightens, beware! There is the door!"

Major Blister saw the door standing ajar, as he stepped back. The eyes of the girl were still fixed upon him, and he tried to give her a look of defiance as he withdrew.

He expected to encounter on the porch the person who had delivered the message received by Adele. That individual had disappeared, without giving the Major even so much as a glimpse of him.

"She is a fool to let me off thus," he laughed to himself, as his feet touched the little porch in front of the house. "This is opening the trap for the wolf. My dear Adele, if this is the game of vengeance you play, you show a poverty-stricken hand to your bitter enemy!"

He sprang from the porch, and turned his back on the house.

"Hello! You here?" he suddenly exclaimed, finding a boyish figure at his side.

"I came back ter find you, Major," was the reply.

"What are they doing with him, boy?" asked Blister, anxiously.

"Nothing as yet."

"Whar are they?"

"Under ther big tree at ther edge of Custer." The boy was our young friend, Quartz Kid, and Major Blister uttered an exclamation of disgust over the last words.

"Did they send for me?"

"Not exactly. Captain Claude told me to come back an' see what had become of you."

"The girl got a message."

"The deuce she did!" ejaculated Quartz.

"Who delivered it?"

"I could not see."

"Man or woman?"

"I tell you I don't know," snapped the Major. "I saw the paper fall on the table, and she told me that they were waiting for me."

Quartz Kid looked puzzled, and exhibited a good deal of uneasiness. It was evident that he was much interested in the person who had delivered the message, and after a minute's silence he said to the Major:

"You know whar ter find the party. I believe it's my duty ter go back."

"What for?"

"For your good, perhaps. I am playin' detective now, an' you know I'm no slouch at the business. Didn't I find Mark the Unknown an' the girl for you? and the person who went ter Sidney in the stage with Gideon an' sent a telegram ahead o' him ter New York?"

"You did that, Quartz?"

"Then let me go back without askin' any questions. You know what to do when you get ter the big tree."

Quartz Kid, who had come to a halt, glided away before the Major could make reply, and in a moment had disappeared.

Blister watched him a second, and then went on.

"I did not get to ask him whar Alaric is, but I will find him with Captain Claude and his pards," he said to himself. "He and I must

fight this game to the end. Gideon can do us no good till he gets back from New York."

"If he ever comes back."

Major Blister halted and looked around.

He heard the five words with wonderful distinctness; they had seemingly been spoken at his very elbow, but nobody was to be seen.

The Sport had reached the outskirts of Custer where the houses were scattering, but the brilliant moon that hung in the heavens like a rounded shield of burnished silver enabled him to see for some distance around.

For several minutes, with a heavy six-shooter cocked in his right hand, Major Blister watched for the possessor of the voice that had startled him. He scanned every shadow, eyed every object with sharpness, ready to send a ball whistling through the first living thing he saw.

"Whoever you are," he suddenly hissed aloud, "I am hyer to say, you lie! Gideon Goldbird will come back from the traps of New York to help us play a dead game among the Black Hills. He waxes his mustache an' plays the dandy sometimes, but for all that he is a tiger. Come forward an' show yourself. We are alone hyer. By the eternal soul! I promise you that we will meet fairly, with any weapon you choose, an' no seconds to fool the time away!"

The Major's words were wasted on the air. Nobody came forward in response to his challenge, and laughing derisively in, as he hoped, the face of his foe, he went on again with the revolver still ready for the encounter.

A short distance from the spot Major Blister came suddenly upon a group of men who greeted him with exclamations of recognition, and the hand of Captain Claude the Vigilante, gripped his arm.

"We've been waitin' for you," said Claude Cressy. "The boys yonder ar' guardin' Mark the Unknown. We want you to say that he is the man who killed Poker Perry."

"You do?" ejaculated the Major staring into the Vigilante's face, and then he ground his teeth behind the last word. "Whar is he?"

He was led forward and halted before a tall man who stood erect with his arms calmly folded upon his chest and a cool gleam in his handsome black eyes.

"I've met many a man in the ring of death like we hev this one," whispered Captain Claude, "but never one exactly like him. I b'lieve we hev ther person who gave Poker Perry the iron blade, but you see we want somebody ter swear ter it, Major. It won't do ter hang him without an oath from somebody."

Major Blister seemed to recoil an inch when the gaze of Mark the Unknown fell upon him. The prisoner stood just without the shadow of the tree whose stoutest limb could tell the story of more than one deed of the Vigilantes. His sombrero was thrown back, revealing his wonderful black eyes and handsome face, and his attitude was wild grace itself.

"So you have come at last," he said to the Custer sport. "These men have been waiting on you."

"Well I am here," said the Major boldly. "I am ready to proclaim you the wielder of the bowie that dropped Poker Perry without warnin' in his tracks."

"I thought so." And Mark threw a quick glance at Captain Claude and his men who had crowded forward waiting to hear the Sport's testimony. "Gentlemen, you will now listen to the testimony of a man who saw nothing of the slaying—a man who is to-night a hunted murderer in the shadow of the very dagger that was taken from the breast of the man called Poker Perry."

"A confession when he knows so much!" laughed the Major.

"Captain Claude, did you search that man?"

"No."

"Search him!" said a voice behind the Vigilante captain.

"Wild Alaric!" cried the Major.

"I say search that man," continued the man from Camp Coyote. "In an inner pocket you will find wrapped in paper the iron blade which took the life of Poker Perry. I am hyer ter swear that a woman who is now in Custer stole ther bowie for him this very night. He will not deny it if pinned to the wall. Gents, if thar ar' no bowie wrapped up on his person Wild Alaric will leave Custer between two days. Search that man!"

Captain Claude stepped toward the prisoner, who quickly threw one hand to his breast.

"I have in my possession a knife fashioned from iron," he said, coolly. "It is an instrument of vengeance and as such will not be surrendered to this court. Yet, for all this, Captain Cressy, no man dare swear before his Maker that he saw me take a human life."

A bitter laugh rung from Major Blister's throat at this.

He wheeled upon Claude Cressy, the Vigilante, while it still echoed, and threw up his bronzed right hand.

"I dare!" he exclaimed. "I am hyer ter swear that the blood of Poker Perry is on the hands of that man! He came to Custer for it, an' it war shed. Ask Wild Alaric, fresh from the mountains, what kind of knife was found in

the heart of Night-Owl Oll of Camp Coyote. Let him describe that knife, an' then look at the one now concealed on that man's person. You want testimony, eh, Captain Claude? It is hyer in abundance, strong enough ter condemn a dozen men, but it all falls on the head of one. I denounce that man, Mark the Unknown, they call him, as the killer of Poker Perry; the iron blade will convict him of the murder in Camp Coyote. I have been threatened within the last hour, but what's a threat ter Major Max Blister, who will fight for justice though the heavens fall? Take my oath, men of Custer City."

The excited Sport held one hand up when he finished, and faced Captain Claude with eagerness and furious triumph.

"Swear me!" he went on. "In all my life nobody has disputed the oath of Major Blister."

All this time there was a cool and very aggravating smile at the corners of the prisoner's mouth. If he believed that he stood in the shadow of the noose, certain it was that he did not fear it. He looked into the faces rendered almost ghastly in the moonlight, and never glanced once at the six-shooters the dark hands held.

"Come to think, we can't try this man first," said Captain Claude.

Major Blister seemed to leave the ground.

"Hades an' horns!" he exclaimed. "Is my oath worth nothin'?"

"It is not that, Major. There is a court in Custer."

"An' a man called Captain Claude who before this has been court, judge an' jury all in one!" was the retort. "When did you discover that you dare not deal with the man yonder?"

The Vigilante captain made no reply.

"Very well, let the thug an' his iron bowie go!" roared the furious Sport. "Turn him loose in Custer City, to die by the hands of the men whose pardons he has killed. If he has worked some infernal spell over you, Claude Cressy, he shall never boast of his triumph in the face of the spy, who confesses that my footsteps have been dogged for a year. He knows me. We know his mission. This is the first time I ever heard of Captain Claude, the King of the Vigilantes, quailing before the glance of a bowie bum!"

Major Blister walked away in a perfect cyclone of rage.

"Turn the knife kid loose!" he threw over his shoulders. "Come, Alaric. You an' I will make Custer recall this hour before the world is much older."

He was joined by Wild Alaric, whose lips said at his ears as his eyes flashed:

"Let me drop him in his boots, cap'n."

"No. I am goin' to keep my word. I intend to give him the length of the very blade he has hidden on his person. He has worked a charm of some kind on Captain Claude."

"I know it. I saw the sign!" was the answer.

"Never mind. We'll get him yet!"

CHAPTER XI.

THE IRON BLADE AGAIN.

It looked as if there was to be no sleep for several of Custer's people that night.

Major Max Blister two hours after the last event related in the previous chapter, was found pacing the little room above the saloon by Wild Alaric, who came in and threw his big hat upon the cot with a growling oath.

For a moment the hunted Sport stopped in his paces, and eyed his pard with flashing eyes and in no good humor.

"Wal, what have you discovered?" he said at last, biting off the words as though he hated them.

"Precious little that's satisfactory," was the answer.

"Whar is he now?"

"Somewhar in ther city I suppose."

"That's mighty definite. An' ther woman?"

"Quartz Kid is watchin' her. He will bring in a report shortly."

Major Blister had to accept this unsatisfactory report. Suddenly he threw himself upon a backless chair at the table, and looked up into Alaric's face.

"Ar' you sartain that a sign passed between Mark the Unknown an' Captain Claude?" he asked.

"Didn't I see it?" replied the man-tiger from Camp Coyote. "It changed ther hull aspect ov ther case in a minute. Before that the demon ov ther iron blade had no show at all—arter that he had all."

"What war that sign?"

"Ther droppin' ov a hand half-way down an' then liftin' it ag'in."

"I saw that movement myself."

"Wal, that war what changed ther Unknown's fate. He an' Cap'n Claude hev met before."

"I could choke him!" came across the table into Wild Alaric's face. "What have you to propose?"

"A sartain movement which you may not take ter," answered the man from the mines.

"Go on."

"We must transfer this mountain game—this blood fight ov ours beyond Custer."

"That thought has entered my head since ther release."

"We must do it. Wherever we go ther iron blade will follow us. We must spread a net for Mark the Unknown among the mountains."

"About Coyote?"

"Thar, if nowhar else," said Alaric. "While Mark remains in Custer, Claude Cressy will be his ally. They were pardons once—ther sign tells me that. If the Unknown is found dead, the hand of the Vigilantes will point at us. We must go."

For several moments Major Blister looked defiantly across the stand, and once or twice seemed on the eve of shaking his head.

He hated to leave Custer, even under the circumstances. It looked like turning his back on the man who was his foe; the move would smack of cowardice.

"Don't say 'no,' cap'n," Wild Alaric went on. "Remember that we will be followed; that is what we want. Mark the Unknown will take up our trail, an' the woman, too, mebbe. We will draw this iron blade into a snare whose closin' will be death. Thar will be no Captain Claude ter save him by a sign, an' death shall turn the bowie in the heart ov Mark the Unknown."

"Then by the infernals! we go!" said the Major. "We transfer our battle-ground."

"Within three days?"

"Within three days!" was the reply.

"I will leave a trail behind for him to follow," Alaric went on, unable to conceal the delight he experienced in having carried his point. "The boy will remain our spy an' messenger hyer. He knows the whole Black Hills country, an' will find us wherever we go."

Major Blister was satisfied and Alaric proceeded to say that he would be welcomed to Camp Coyote by a lot of men who were ready to take vengeance for the death of Night-Owl Oll the first victim of the iron blade.

Thirty minutes later Major Blister left the room and walked down to the Dolores. It was a tramp for some distance down not very light streets, and the Sport of Two Cities mindful of the wild events of the early night kept his hand on the butt of a revolver as he hurried along.

Nobody stepped into his path, and he entered the hotel accosting the clerk Mr. Si Slinkum with his fearless laugh.

"No more letters for me, eh, Si my boy?" he said.

"None, Major."

"I should have had another by this time I think," continued the Sport as he reached the stairs.

Mr. Cyrus Slinkum bestowed a serious look on the Major as he mounted the steps and passed up to the second floor on which his room was situated.

"Jehul I seem to have it at last!" suddenly exclaimed the clerk. "It has come to me like a flash. I have been trying for six months to make out where I have met that man before. I think I have it now."

The clerk left his cramped quarters and followed the Dolores's guest up the steps.

"It may be none of my business, but I'm going to satisfy myself," he muttered. "He won't kick very hard if I've gauged him right, and, situated as he is in Custer just now, he'll have to accept my apology of I am wrong. Why didn't I hit it before?"

Showing by his eyes that he had made, to him, some astounding discovery, Cyrus Slinkum went direct to a certain room and rapped on the door. It was immediately opened and the clerk confronted Major Blister who seemed surprised to see him there.

"Beg your pardon," said Cyrus gliding into the room without the sign of an invitation. "I have come up to renew a somewhat previous acquaintance. I am glad to have met you again, Andros Ruby; we haven't met as we should perhaps for—"

The clerk did not get to finish his sentence though he was very near the end.

Major Blister who had been eying him like a hawk sprung forward, and dropped his hand upon his shoulder.

"If you know me you know enough to keep still!" he exclaimed. "Open your infernal head another time about Andros Ruby and a telegram will go over the wires to the police of New York. The banking house of Sharpe, Dodge and Co. want the address of their thieving messenger. Oh, your eyes will get bigger than they are now, Jasper Judd, alias Si Slinkum, if you persist in calling me Andros Ruby. I knew you the moment I first set eyes on you in Custer. Am I Andros Ruby to you now?"

The face of the clerk was colorless, and his frame quivered like an aspen stalk in the clutches of the cool-eyed man of Two Cities.

"N—no! you are Major Max Blister," he stammered.

"That is it. Remember! if I am any other person to you in Custer or elsewhere, your career of second-hand honesty will come to a close. Thought you had struck it rich when you made the discovery, eh?"

Cyrus Slinkum felt a chill run alone his spine. The dark, threatening eyes of Major Blister

seemed to emit sparks of fire while they looked him through, and the hand on his shoulder did not relax.

"I was right, but by George! I've stirred up the wrong man!" muttered the clerk. "I gave my fuse too short a burn. He's got the grip on me, sure enough." And Cyrus tried gently to shake the bronzed hand loose.

"Go down to your desk, Cyrus," said the Major. "Don't play with a kind of fire you know nothing about. When you are older, boy, you will know what I mean. Good-night."

Such an abrupt dismissal was totally unexpected by the clerk of the Dolores. He found himself free and his first movement was a step toward the door.

"I didn't think he had caught on to me," murmured the discomfited clerk, as he went down the stairs. "I've got to do one or two things—leave Custer or blow on the man upstairs. I don't trust him. If some bad fortune overtakes him, he will lay it at my door, and the dispatch he mentioned will go to New York. I would sooner go to the North pole than back to the city where I am known as Jasper Judd."

When he reached the reception room he found it entirely empty. The hands of the clock above the desk pointed to twelve and Cyrus closed the outer doors as it was customary to do at that hour.

The Dolores was kept open all night. A number of its guests patronized the gambling-dens of Custer and came in at odd intervals after midnight. Cyrus's time on was until one o'clock so that he had still an hour of duty.

Twenty times he glanced uneasily at the stairway the first steps of which were visible from his post, and as often he seemed to change his mind.

"It will be a terrible thing to be held under the thumb of that man," he said half aloud. "As Andros Ruby he committed a crime in New York that set the city wild. He used to patronize our bank and that's how I came to know him. He will be my mortal bane if he stays here. I must play a shrewd game if I give him away for he will do worse than hand me over to the law for my New York escapade. There is shoot in his tiger eyes."

Cyrus fell to watching the clock as the hands crept slowly toward one. He fretted like a bird in captivity. Now and then some guest would come in and pass to the adjoining bar where he would rouse the drowsy bartender and get a final drink before going to bed.

Once or twice Cyrus forgot himself and dropped asleep.

At last the clock struck, and the clerk sprung up. He knew that an alarm-clock in a room near by would waken the man who was to fill his place till morning.

"I've got my mind made up," he muttered. "I have weighed the whole matter carefully for the last time, and I know just what to do. By the eternal loves! I am not going to sit and tremble in the shadow of no murderer's threat!"

These were very brave words for Cyrus Slinkum. He seemed to take on new courage as he uttered them.

"I know where to find Captain Claude," he went on. "He never gives anything away."

Just as he closed the register with a slam he heard some one on the stair and looked up.

"Ah! is it you, Jim?" he exclaimed. "You are on time as usual."

"I'm on deck. But what is the matter in Number 44?"

Cyrus almost sprung over the counter. It was Major Blister's room.

"Why, Jim? What have you heard?"

"A noise like the fall of a heavy body," was the reply. "I wasn't more than half-awake, but I heard it distinctly."

"When?"

"Twenty minutes ago."

"We'll go up and see."

The two young men went up the steps together, Si Slinkum with a white face, but with a pleased expression in his startled eyes.

They went direct to the Major's room and found the door half-open.

Cyrus was the first of the twain to cross the threshold.

"Heaven! there has been murder here!" he cried.

He stopped in the middle of the room and pointed to the stalwart human figure that lay half doubled up at the foot of a chair.

A lamp was burning on a table near by, and Jim the assistant clerk picked it up, and held it near the man's face.

"It is Major Blister!" cried the two clerks at the same moment.

"And look there, Jim! The same iron dagger that killed Poker Perry a few days ago is sticking in his back!"

The two young men recoiled.

"I am safe at last," gasped Cyrus. "I owe the wielder of that terrible iron blade a debt of gratitude."

A brief inspection of the room showed that there had been a slight struggle between two persons.

All at once Jim pounced upon a bit of paper

that lay under the table, and the next moment two pair of dilated eyes were staring at it.

"To Alaric—" Cyrus read aloud.

"Hyer! that means me!" exclaimed a voice at the sound of which the two clerks turned and found themselves face to face with a man who had come into the room with the stealth of a shadow.

"You?" they exclaimed.

"Yes; I am Alaric," said the man as his hand closed on the paper. "If that iron blade has finished the Major, it has spared the worst tiger of ther five. I am capable of fighting blades alone!"

CHAPTER XII.

HARD TO KILL.

THE talk in Custer City the remainder of that night, and the whole of the next day was the blow dealt in Major Blister's room at the Dolores, and with the Major himself for the victim.

For once the iron blade had failed to accomplish its mission, for the Sport of Two Cities was not dead, and the doctors who had been called in said there was no need of him dying just yet.

With grated teeth the Major lay on a cot on the floor looking into the eyes of the dark-faced men who watched him, and who appeared to be smothering a dozen oaths at once.

"Twist that infernal dagger handle three times, Alaric," suddenly said the Major. "Mebbe that man-panther left a message for somebody in the handle. I found a paper in thar arter Poker Perry war killed, you know. Three times ter the right."

Wild Alaric drew the iron dagger from under the Major's pillow and went to work, but the handle would not budge.

"What's the matter?" asked Blister astonished.

"This is a solid handle," was the reply. "It is as firmly fixed as a mountain."

"I turned it once."

"Not this bowie handle."

"Yes, that one."

The Custer City Sport put forth one hand, and took the terrible looking blade. He set his teeth hard again when he remembered that it had been driven into his flesh in search of his heart, and his eyes seemed to take fire.

Wild Alaric watched him with much curiosity while he tried to turn the handle.

"It will not move for me now," the Major exclaimed disappointed, and then he fell to examining the blade in the sunlight that streamed into the room.

"Thar are two iron blades!" he exclaimed looking up into his pard's eyes. "The handle of this one is solidly fixed; the hilt of the other turns! What does it mean?"

"It means that the blade that killed Poker Perry did not cut you," was the answer. "You have lost the bet sent to the Dolores in a sealed envelope—five hundred to ten that you'd have a knife between your shoulders inside of ten days. It got thar, Major."

The man on the cot was silent for a minute.

"That is true. I have lost," he said at last.

"I did not get a fair look at the man who struck last night. The room was dark when he came in. He must have lit the lamp before he went away. It was burning when I crept to the table and wrote that letter for you. Alaric, we are going to make the trail we were talking about to-night."

"If you say so, Major, it shall be made; if you say stay hyer an' fight it out, fight it shall be."

"We go to Coyote. I will be on my feet again in six days. The man with the iron blade never studied anatomy. He didn't know whar to strike last night. Leave Quartz Kid behind for spy an' messenger. He will watch the girl called Adele, an' Mark the Unknown. To-night, Alaric, you will be here with the horses, at eight."

Wild Alaric nodded. He saw determination in the eyes of the man who looked up into his face.

"I will spread in the mountains a net for these two merciless hunters," said Major Blister when he found himself alone. "They will follow us out of Custer; they will hunt us to Camp Coyote, and thar they will finally fail! Hyer one would have to fight them with Captain Claude Cressy more than half their ally. It will not do. The knife I felt between my shoulders last night war put thar by the other hunter—the man with the gray eyes who took the letter from Quartz Kid. He is at work now; he and Mark the Unknown are in league."

The days passed slowly away, and Wild Alaric made frequent trips to Major Blister's room.

There was a sullen fierceness in the eyes of this dark-faced pard that attracted the attention of all who noticed him. He said little or nothing to anybody, and few questioned him about the Major's condition. They got their information from the doctors and at the hotel desk, where Si Slinkum, the clerk, answered in a manner which indicated that he was sorry

that the iron blade had not accomplished its purpose.

Quartz Kid came to the Dolores at sundown with a report that made the Major start.

"The other man has come back," the boy said. "I mean the Satan-eyed fellow who mesmerized me out of that letter."

"Whar is he, Kid?"

"Smoking a cigar on the street, as cool as anybody."

"Let him be."

"But I want that letter."

"Don't cross him. We will attend to him before long. From to-night you are wholly in the service of Major Max Blister. Obey me in everything, Kid, an' when ends the game we ar' playin' now, you shall be the bonanza king of Custer City. You like to play detective, eh?"

"I guess I war cut out for that," said Quartz Kid.

"You know the Hills pretty well?"

"I think so."

"Did you ever hear of Camp Coyote?"

"I've been thar."

"Good!" ejaculated the Major, well pleased.

"You are the very friend I want. Wild Alaric and I are going to Coyote this night. We want a spy behind; we want some one to watch the movements of several persons, and to report."

"Try me for that!" said Quartz Kid, with enthusiasm. "If I am ter watch ther Satan-eyed galoot I'm yer huckleberry, Major."

"He is to be watched, also the others."

"Mark the Unknown?"

"And the girl called Adele."

The boy put his hand into the dark palm of the wounded Sport.

"This hand says, through thick an' thin, Major!" he exclaimed. "I will play hawk ter yer entire satisfaction, but I'd like ter know one thing."

"Well?"

"Mebbe it's none o' my business," said Quartz doubtfully, "but for all that, I'd like ter know why they're playin' this lone game ag'in' yer, Major."

The eyes of boy and man met at the end of the sentence. Quartz Kid's look was deep, penetrating and full of curiosity. Major Blister, the Sport, could not avoid it.

"It's an old score," he said at length.

"Made in the West?" asked the boy.

"Yes."

"Then, what does this mean?"

At that moment Quartz Kid's hand dived beneath his jacket, and came out again with a piece of paper that resembled an old letter.

"Read that, Major," he said, putting the article into Blister's hand. "I found that paper in Adele's house to-day."

"Have you been thar?"

"I war playin' detective!" laughed the boy. "I got inter ther house by a secret way, an' found it empty—nobody at home. Under a table lay that piece of an old letter. I see your name on it, Major."

While he was listening to the boy spy, the Sport of Two Cities was reading the little half-sheet of paper which his hands had unfolded.

It was true—his name was there.

"Did you read all this?" he said, suddenly looking up and fixing his eyes on Quartz Kid, in a manner that demanded a plain answer.

"Yes," said the boy promptly. "I saw yer name ther first thing, an' that war enough ter fix my attention. Ther longer I read, ther more interested I got, Major. I couldn't help it."

"It amounts to nothin'," said the Sport. "This letter is a part of the game against me. There are some things in it I can't understand."

"It was written in New York."

"Yes."

"By a woman, if I'm a judge of handwritin'. It calls you Andros Ruby, Major, an' says that the hand of vengeance is against you, for something committed in New York years ago."

"Curse them! they will play their game out by false letters," grated the Major. "Me Andros Ruby? Ask Wild Alaric, who never lies—the man who has known me for twenty years."

"I showed this letter to him an hour ago."

Major Blister started.

"Wal, what did Alaric say?"

"Pretty much what you hev said. He denounced ther whole thing as a part of a scheme ag'in' you."

"Alaric knows. You found no more letters in that house, Kid?"

"This piece was all."

Major Max crushed the bit of written paper in his hand, and wished no doubt that it was the writer.

"We leave Custer at eight o'clock to-night," he continued. "Alaric and I are going to Camp Coyote. What for? We are going to play the rest of this life game thar!"

Quartz Kid went down the steps, leaving the Major once more alone.

"It was well that the boy showed the letter to no one but Alaric and I," he murmured. "If it had fallen into Captain Claude's hands, we might not get to leave Custer City to-night. The boy is right—a woman wrote the letter, of which this piece is a part. She knows me—she betrays her identity in the oath of vengeance it

contains. I know whose hand directs the iron blades. I have yet to discover who wield them."

The sun went down and the hour of eight came slowly on. As the clock in the Dolores struck the hour, Wild Alaric rode up to the sidewalk. His left hand led an extra horse.

There were few persons about at that hour, and Si Slinkum, the clerk, suspected nothing when he saw Alaric cross the room and go upstairs.

Ten minutes later he came down accompanied by Major Blister, a trifle paler than usual, but seemingly no worse for the use of the iron blade.

"I've let the opportunity slip," cried Cyrus. "The man is going to get well."

At that moment he encountered the gaze of the cool Sport, and the next second Blister was leaning over the desk. His eyes glittered coldly like a serpent's.

"I am going away for a spell, Mr. Slinkum," he said, still eying Cyrus. "If necessary, I will have hourly reports from Custer. Remember!"

That was threat enough. The clerk of the Dolores recoiled with frightened eyes and ghastly face, and when he recovered, Major Max was gone.

"Under his thumb!" he gasped. "If I leave Custer, I will be followed by some infernal spy of his. I've got to stay hyer in hot water between lid an' bottom. You're the most miserable man on earth, Si Slinkum!"

Meanwhile, the Sport of Two Cities had walked to Alaric's extra horse, which he mounted with the assistance of his mountain pard.

The few spectators said nothing, but all seemed surprised that a man who had lately received a blow from a bowie, should display such tenacity. They did not see Major Blister grind his teeth as he mounted the steed, nor did they hear the groan the action cost him. The movement seemed to tear his vitals apart.

Side by side the two men rode slowly down Custer's principal street, the light from some public houses now and then in their faces.

The hunted sport said nothing until the last house was left behind. The lights of the Black Hills were behind them, and Major Blister let slip an exclamation of joy when he saw them over his shoulder.

"Out of the toils at last, Alaric," he said, turning to his bronzed pard. "We've got the trackers behind us, but it will not be for long I hope. They will follow us to Coyote. Quartz Kid knows how to put them on our trail. They will walk into the mountain trap we will set for them at Coyote, an' then, by the cloven foot of Satan! they will discover that the days of the iron blade have ended."

Alaric laughed while he looked into his master's face.

"You may bet yer life on this, Major. The game takes a new turn to-night!"

CHAPTER XIII.

A RED-HOT BLISTER.

CAMP COYOTE was what Wild Alaric would call his "stamping-ground;" but to Major Blister it was a new place.

Walled in by a mountain range which seemed to have opened for the express purpose of taking the camp in, it occupied a snug place among the Black Hills and as the crow flies was about sixty miles from Custer.

Its cabins were not over thirty in number, rough, uncouth but strong and serviceable structures, admirably answering the purposes of the men who inhabited them.

Wild Alaric received a welcome to Coyote that was highly flattering, and the Major was told to feel at home where his pard was so well known.

The journey had greatly leached the Sport of Two Cities for he still felt keenly the work of the iron blade, but he reached Coyote in presentable condition, and ground his teeth while he laughed defiance in Alaric's face.

"Set the trap and let 'em come!" he exclaimed. "I am ready, cut as I am, for the last grapple with the two blades. Ah! Alaric, when we have settled with the blood-hunters we will hold a carnival of victory that will make Custer or Coyote open its eyes. Now, let them come!"

Coyote had, like its many rivals in the Black Hills, a place where its wild characters came nightly together, and there the first night after the arrival of the pards the Major received his formal introduction to the denizens of the camp.

"You'll get along with the Coyotes," observed Wild Alaric, with a smile, as he walked beside Blister back to the cabin they were to share in common. "Night-Owl's death has found them all ter me, an' I hev ter hint thet ther man who knifed him wants yer blood ter make 'em all yer pards."

"We won't want their help, Alaric. This game is ours—it is a grapple of four terrible men."

"An' one woman, eh, Major?" laughed Alaric.

"I don't count her. She will prove no important factor in ther game, although she expects ter play a cold hand," was the answer.

Wild Alaric said nothing.

He had seen the young girl who was Mark's friend; he had looked, unseen himself, into her jet-black eyes, and he believed that she would prove a greater foe than the Unknown himself.

More than once Major Blister took out the iron dagger and looked at it, with eyes that always flashed and teeth that met like a tiger's whenever the terrible blade was in sight.

It was the exact counterpart of the one whose handle turned. If the two had been placed side by side, they could not have been distinguished one from the other.

"I don't care who wields these two bowies, the same hand fashioned them," he always said, while he contemplated the one that had struck him. "This makes me believe that the man with black eyes and he with the gray are in league."

And then he would end with a laugh and say, with the flash of a challenge:

"I wish they would come!"

Wild Alaric knew what he was saying when he told the Major that Coyote would suit him, and that he would find its society congenial. This turned out to be true.

The pards of Coyote took kindly to the Sport of Two Cities. Wild Alaric dropped a few words here and there that led them to infer that Major Blister was a persecuted man, that the person who had killed Night-Owl Oil wanted his blood also, and that he had been cowardly attacked by an assassin in Custer, barely escaping with his life.

This was enough to secure to the Major the friendship of the bronzed and dark-shirted roughs of Coyote. Before the end of the first week they were ready to elect him to the position of alcalde, but he shook his head and refused the honor.

Six days and no message from Quartz Kid. The boy had received certain instructions from Major Blister before the flight from Custer; he could not forget them. He was to watch the two avengers and Adele, the girl. He was also to inform them privately that Major Blister and his pard were to be found at Coyote. Quartz Kid was the sworn ally of the hunted sports.

It was the seventh day after the arrival in Camp Coyote that Major Blister received his first news from the world beyond the mountains.

He was in the act of pouring into a very thick glass some of Terrapin Tom's best liquor, when a hand touched his own and he looked down into the eyes of Quartz Kid.

The Major started as if a messenger from the dead stood beside him; he left the fiery liquor untasted.

"At last! By Jove! I'm glad to see you, boy!" he exclaimed. "You have fetched us news?"

"I have news," said the boy, and his eyes showed that he had come to Coyote with some important information.

Major Blister led the way to the cabin, and having crossed the threshold, he turned on Quartz Kid and seized his arm.

"Now open your budget. By Jupiter! I've been waiting six days for something," he said.

"In the first place, the whole game seems ter be up."

The Major uttered an exclamation of wonderment.

"Mark an' ther girl hev left Custer, an' ther Satan-orbed man is gone too."

"When did they go?"

"Ther night arter you left."

"Wal, they haven't hit Coyote," exclaimed the Major.

"I don't know anything about that of course. All I can say is that they're gone—the hull set. In the second place, Si Slinkum the livin' mummy thet stood at the clerk's desk in the Dolores has vamoused the town."

"That's nothing to me!" said the Major.

"He left behind him a paper that created considerable talk in Custer."

"He did, eh?" flashed the Sport of Two Cities. "Did that infernal young fool whom I should have throttled—did he aim his Parthian arrows at me?"

"I guess he did, Major. He put the paper where it would not be found till he had thirty hours the start. It said that you are not Max Blister. It calls you—let me see now—"

"Never mind what the liar said!" said the Major whose face resembled a lobster's shell for redness. "One of these days I shall get my hands on this forger-coward after which he will leave no more documents behind when he runs off! But what was the sentiment in Custer when you left?"

"Pretty much ag'in' yer Major," replied Quartz Kid frankly.

Max Blister bit his lips in silence for a moment, and avoided the boy's gaze. Suddenly he looked up again.

"Any more news?" he asked.

"Yes; last night Gideon came back."

"Gideon Goldbird, my messenger to New York?" cried the Major almost springing from his stool. "What does he say?"

"I don't know. He came up in the stage from Sidney, an' went right to bed. I left at daylight, but before I came away I stole up to his

room an' found him still asleep. Major, you wouldn't know Gideon."

"Why not, Kid?"

"He's lost the handsome mustache he had when he went away. He looks thin, like a living skeleton. That man has seen terrible times since he left Custer for New York."

"I wish you had kept back long enough to have heard Gideon's story," the Major said.

"If it is like he looks, I don't want to hear it," answered Quartz Kid with a faint smile.

There was no answer, and the boy got up and went to the little window and looked up the street.

"Jimminy crickets!" he suddenly exclaimed.

"Talk about Satan an' he's sure ter turn up."

"Who's out thar?"

Major Blister was at the boy's side while he spoke.

"Mr. Slinkum, late of Custer."

"The hound who maligned me ere he left?"

"Mr. Slinkum of the Dolores."

The next instant the Sport of Two Cities was on the outside of the cabin, and his eyes caught sight of a figure ere it disappeared beyond the threshold of Coyote's most prominent bar-room.

"The fool will think he has trumbled headlong into a human steel-trap," the boy heard the desperado hiss. "He had to call me Andros Ruby before he left Custer, and in the papers he left behind he gave me away to such men as Captain Claude and pards. I owe you a terrible debt for this, Jasper Judd, forger, thief and burglar's pal! You don't dream that in your wanderings you have found the very man of all men whom you do not want to meet."

Away went the maddest man in Camp Coyote with his eyes fastened on the saloon.

"Hang me, if I don't pity the wandering wretch," said Quartz Kid, as he watched Major Max storming toward the den. "He never treated me half white, that's a fact, but I pity him for all that."

It was too late to overtake the Major, too late also to get between him and his victim. The boy followed him eager to see what would happen, and ready to shield if possible his old acquaintance of the Dolores.

Meanwhile, Si Slinkum looking seedy and altogether unlike the sleek personage who used to receive guests in Custer had reached the counter with a very thirsty look. He had walked straight to the den finding it as if by instinct, and had not inquired where he was.

"Give me your hottest and best," was the order that greeted the man behind the bar, and while Cyrus was pouring out the drink he looked up to ask:

"What place is this?"

"Camp Coyote, sir."

If the fugitive clerk had been told that he had entered pandemonium he would not have shown more astonishment.

The up-turned bottle almost dropped from his hand.

Camp Coyote!

He seemed to realize that he had entered the wrong place. He had indeed remembered to have heard it said in Custer that Major Blister and Wild Alaric had come to Coyote.

"Let me get out of here at once," he said, to himself, as he gulped down the burning stuff that brought tears to his eyes and almost choked him. "If this is Coyote, I have stepped into the fire."

At that moment the figure of Major Blister entered at the open door.

The desperado saw his victim at the first glance, and the next instant his hand dropped like a trip-hammer upon the clerk's shoulder.

"This is the last place on earth for you, Jasper Judd!" he exclaimed.

Cyrus turned with a cry of horror. If the Major's hand had not clutched him like the merciless grip of a vise, he would have cleared the den at a bound.

"You? you?" he gasped looking up into Max Blister's face.

"Why not?" laughed the Sport. "Did you expect to meet an angel in Coyote? You will never brand me as Andros Ruby to another town. Jasper Judd, forger and traitor, your time has come! To you I am Andros the Devil!"

CHAPTER XIV.

STILL ON THE TRAIL.

GIDEON GOLDBIRD had come back to Custer, which announcement is evidence enough that he had disappointed somebody by not dying in the cellar under Mother Redbird's Mulberry street trap.

Quartz Kid the Major's boy detective had spoken truly when he said that Gideon had lost his most prominent adornment—his long black mustache which he was wont to keep well waxed and in excellent order.

In his little room over the saloon his old haunt and place of business Gideon awoke the morning after his return, and found the sun shining in his face. He could hardly realize that he was once more in Custer, and several times a strange shiver made his teeth chatter.

He got up went to a cracked mirror in a shod-

dy frame, looked at his pale and ghastly image once, and then gave utterance to an exclamation of horror.

"Another trip to New York, Gideon, would do you up entirely," he said aloud. "May I look on the gridiron ov Tartarus! if I'd repeat my experience for all the gold in the Sierras. That man who calls himself John Leopard is but half-human; he could doom a man to a pit ov tarantulas an' smile while he did it. I am not lach hyer by any of his mercy—not by a hanged sight. I had to lose my mustache which I wouldn't have sold for a thousand a month ago. Nobody recognized me in the stage comin' up from Sidney an' I don't wonder either. I don't even resemble the ghost ov Gideon Goldbird."

Gideon proceeded to fortify himself with several invigorating drinks before he ventured out.

He knew nothing of the events which had taken place in Custer during his absence, and Quartz Kid who had stolen to his room and found him asleep had left him to his dreams without imparting any information.

Gideon passed a dozen old friends without being recognized. Nobody dreamed that he would ever come back to Custer without that matchless mustache.

The first thunderbolt that struck him was the death of Poker Perry by the iron blade; then other surprises followed until he knew that Major Blister and Wild Alaric had decamped from Custer.

"If they are huntin' the Major with a knife they'll not overlook Gideon Goldbird!" he ejaculated. "Why did I come back hyer when I got out of New York? I didn't have ter. Yes, I did; there was the Major's cool an' awful threat starin' me in the face."

Gideon saw the shadows of night fall about the Black Hills town before he could decide what to do.

He kept pretty close during the day, and the voices of old acquaintances, heard unexpectedly, sent a thrill to his heart. He looked more and more like a hunted man as the shadows lengthened, and more than once he braced his nerves anew by copious draughts of his favorite decoction.

At last he made up his mind to quit Custer. There already seemed a Nemesis at his heels, and he appeared to live in the terrible shadow of the iron-handled dagger.

In the solitude of his little room, without a lamp, Gideon resolved to join the Major and Wild Alaric if possible. He remembered that Alaric had inhabited Camp Coyote, and it was natural for him to believe that the hunted pards had gone there. He would seek Coyote also.

Gideon had nothing to pack. His worldly possessions consisted of the clothes he wore, a lowie knife and a brace of revolvers. The weapons were friends with whom he swore he would never part.

It was dark when he stole down-stairs ready for flight. The gambling-dens of young Custer were already in full blast and the little city was living again its wild life.

Out on the street, Gideon took a long breath. He was again a hunted man, but this time damp walls did not surround him, and he did not hear the merciless laugh of John Leopard, the cool head of New York.

He did not think of leaving Custer afoot; he might have need of horse-flesh before he reached Camp Coyote, and he had a steed in his mind's eye.

"Good-by, Custer," he said, trying to smile. "When I come back, if I ever do, I will not present my present appearance. We three will play a game against this iron bowie which hunts us night an' day from what I've learned. Only let me get beyond Custer—then let its accursed owner look out."

Gideon had not advanced a square toward the spot where he expected to mount a horse before he was glancing uneasily over his shoulder. He seemed to believe that he was already tracked.

Once or twice he stopped and laid his hand on one of his six-shooters while he ground his teeth and growled defiance.

He reached a certain house however, and was admitted. It was the home of the driver of the stage between Custer and Sidney, a big man with a jolly eye and as brown as a Tartar.

"You told me once, Philip, that if ever my day of trouble came to come to you. Wal, hyer I am."

The stage-driver did not recognize the man before him.

"Who are you?" he cried.

"What! don't you know Gideon Goldbird?"

"Jehu! whar's yer mustache? Thar wasn't another like it West o' St. Louis!"

Gideon almost groaned.

"I'll get another with your help, Philip," he said looking down into the man's eyes. "I'm goin' away an' I want a horse. Rememl or your injunction, Philip Phinn. I am in trouble. I have come to you."

"An' I'll help you, Gideon!"

Gideon Goldbird clutched the driver's arm with a cry of gratitude. Help meant escape.

"Do you recollect the woman who rode down ter Sidney in the corner of the stage

when you went East?" suddenly continued Philip.

Gideon started till his clutch tightened.

"Heavens! I ought to!" he exclaimed. "I'd just like ter have my fingers at her throat for two minutes before leavin' Custer!"

"Wal, I saw that same creature since sundown."

"In Custer?"

"In Custer!"

A cold chill seemed to sweep over Gideon, then his eyes blazed like two hard struck matches.

"Do you really want to see her, Gideon?" asked the old whip.

"N—no, not now," was the answer. "I want to get out o' Custer just now. I'll turn on that she viper some other time!"

Philip Phinn smiled and led the hunted sport to the stables where he kept his horses.

"How did you get along East, Gideon?" he asked.

"Let me answer that question some other time. How did I get along, Philip? I wish I had a revolver at the head of a man who stands on the pier in New York an' watches like a spider for his victims. Give me your best horse, Philip."

"I'll do that, Gideon."

Gideon Goldbird contented himself as best he could while a well-limbed horse, full of fire and eager to be off, was saddled by the stage-driver. The Custer Sport was eager to be off; he longed to pass the sixty miles between Custer and Coyote, and to look once more into the cool eyes of Major Blister, his master.

At last he was in the saddle, and saw Philip tighten the girth.

"Watch out, Gideon! They want you with the rest," said the old fellow.

"Who does—who wants Gideon Goldbird?"

"Aha! You ought ter know by this time!" was the retort. "Forward, my friend! When you come back, bring your old mustache along."

"By Jove! I will!" was the answer. "I swear ter you, Philip, that whenever I come back ter Custer I'll hev that mustache," and laughing for the first time in many hours, Gideon rode away.

The stage-driver was destined to recall that oath before long.

Philip watched Gideon till the shadows of night hid his figure.

"That man will fight like a tiger when cornered," he said; "but just now he is under some wild spell that makes him look like he faces a ghost."

As for Gideon, he rode through the suburbs of Custer, past the ghostly, scattering houses, the tall trees and spectral bushes. He left the wild scenes of the dens at his back, and loosened his bowie and looked to his revolvers as he went over the trail that far away ran through Camp Coyote.

"Stretch me for a Greaser, if I haven't struck a streak ov luck at last!" cried Gideon, with two miles behind him. "So the woman who shadowed me ter Sidney was in Custer at sundown? Let her stay thar till I've settled with the Major an' Alaric in Coyote—then let her come on!"

Ten minutes later, without a sign of warning, a dark figure appeared in the Coyote trail.

"Isn't Custer healthy, Gideon Goldbird?" said a voice which made the hunted sport recoil and forget for the moment that he was armed to the teeth.

The question was supplemented by a laugh that awoke a thousand strange echoes in the wild pass.

"Come, Gideon! don't force me to spoil that face of yours. You have left Custer, I see. You must have found it as uncongenial as you found New York."

"Jehosaphat! In Satan's name, who are you?"

Gideon leaned forward and saw the person who confronted him.

A woman on horseback!

"It is you, is it?" he cried. "You are the woman who followed me to Sidney; you posted the man who waited for me on the pier in New York. I see! You are a part of the league against us. I warn you now, witch, to keep out of my way! I owe you a debt which your sex will not prevent me from paying. Oh! you infernal tigress, I will spoil your beauty! I'll make dim your mad black eyes!"

Gideon was becoming bold. He even laid his hand on one of his revolvers.

"Don't do that, Gideon," said the woman, with a menace in her tone. "We are not going to part company. I am going to Camp Coyote, and we will keep each other company."

"You had better not. I'll strangle you inside of a mile!"

The answer was a defiant laugh.

"We'll risk that, Gideon!" said the woman. "I am anxious to know how you got along in New York. Where did you leave that brilliant mustache you took away? Ah! off we are! Now go on with your story."

The two horses were side by side in the trail; their riders touched.

Gideon was amazed at the coolness, the fearlessness of the strange woman. He looked into

her face and saw that she really was his stage companion to Sidney.

"By Jupiter! I will try to take her to Coyote!" he suddenly thought. "I'll play my cards with that end in view, and if I succeed, I promise myself that she will never shadow another man in Sidney! Never!"

CHAPTER XV.

TIGERS IN COYOTE.

QUARTZ KID, who reached the door of the saloon in Coyote in time to see Major Blister swoop down upon Si Slinkum like an eagle, stopped spellbound on the threshold. He deeply pitied the clerk, who had walked into peril, and he—the boy spy—accused himself of much of Cyrus's present misery; for he had acquainted the Major with the circumstances attending the flight from Custer.

"I'd like ter help you in some way, Mr. Slinkum, but I don't see how I can," said the boy. "You've tumbled into the claws of a tiger, sure enough, an' they won't prove velvet claws, either."

The young spotter saw Cyrus dragged across the bar room by the Sport of Two Cities, who looked at him with that triumph displayed by a hawk when he has captured a stubborn victim.

"So you ran off from Custer, but left behind papers that denounced me as Andros Ruby, a thug from New York?" hissed the Major. "Don't you know, Si Slinkum—as you want to be called here—that you play a bad hand with papers of that kind? I have you now, and as I told you a while ago, I guess your time has come!"

"I have done wrong, Major. My God! why didn't I let those papers be?" cried Cyrus.

"Yes, why not?" laughed Blister. "Come with me, Cyrus. I am executioner, judge an' jury in a case of this kind."

He turned abruptly, with the young man still in his clutches. Quartz Kid saw the movement, and stepped back, but he was too slow for Cyrus Slinkum's eyes.

"I see who did it all!" the clerk exclaimed. "That boy is ahead of me. He told you, Major Blister. He was here when I came. He never liked me, an' now this is his revenge."

Quartz Kid made no reply, but watched the exciting scene of Cyrus being dragged toward the cabins by his captor.

"I don't hate that poor wretch. I never did, but I didn't like the style he used to put on at the Dolores. He used to be a little too big for his clothes, but for all that he's a good fellow at heart. I'll help you if I can, Cyrus, but I'm afraid I can be of no service to you."

Major Blister took the clerk to the cabin, which he and Wild Alaric had inhabited since reaching the camp, and Cyrus was dumped upon a wooden stool without any ceremony.

He had no color now, and his eyes were full of fear and fright.

"Do you recognize this?" suddenly asked the Major, taking from a rough shelf some object wrapped in paper.

Cyrus leaned forward with a curiosity which he could not suppress, and uttered an exclamation when the paper was fairly unwrapped.

A terrible-looking iron-handled bowie lay in the Major's hand, and the desperado Sport looked up into the clerk's eyes.

"Have you ever seen this before?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Whar?"

"In Custer."

"When?"

"The night Poker Perry was killed."

Major Blister shook his head.

"No; this is not the one. The handle of that blade turned; this one will not move. I felt this devilish dagger between my shoulders, but I'm not hyer ter tell the story, Cyrus. Thar are two iron blades exactly alike."

The clerk of the Dolores exhibited his wonderment in his eyes.

"I am going to get the owners of those daggers," the Major went on. "We are waiting for them now, Mr. Slinkum. You came on ahead of them, so we'll have to deal with you first."

Cyrus almost bounded from the stool. The Sport of Two Cities spoke with a coolness that sent a shudder through his frame.

"Mercy!" he cried.

"Don't be a child, Cyrus!" laughed the Major. "You never thought of mercy while you war drawing up the papers that denounced me as Andros Ruby. Show some courage now, and look your fate squarely in the face."

"What—are—you—going—to—do—with me?"

"I shall put you out of Andros Ruby's way forever!" was the cold whisper.

The next moment the hand of the Sport encircled the clerk's wrist, and Cyrus got up without an invitation to do so. He did not plead again; but with all color out of his lips and hope fading from his eyes, he stood ready for his fate.

Major Blister suddenly dropped the young man's hand and went to the cabin door. It was now dark outside, and the nearest cabins were scarcely visible. Cyrus looked at the little window to his left, but it offered him no escape, and

the giant figure of Major Blister barred the way to freedom by the door.

When Blister stepped back he caught the clerk's wrist again and led him away. Cyrus noticed that the iron-handled dagger was missing; he knew it had not been returned to the shelf; it must be concealed on the Sport's person.

The two went up the camp's main street together and at the last cabin Major Blister turned suddenly toward the mountain. Cyrus was led on like a lamb to the slaughter.

"They may carry this thing too far!" he said to himself at last. "I'll die a fool if I make no fight for life, and after all it is better to go back to New York, and face the law than be murdered in the Black Hills."

To the merciless man whose fingers seemed to sink into his wrist Cyrus Slinkum said nothing as he was hurried along. He saw the ghostly trees and rocks and knew that they had left Camp Coyote behind.

Major Blister did not halt with his prisoner until he had reached a place a mile from camp. It was a secluded spot between two rocky walls and a suitable place for a terrible crime.

"Hyer we are, Cyrus," he said in his old tones as he looked down into the clerk's face. "I never beat about the bush in a case of this kind. I am going to end your trail with the knife that hunted my heart in room Number 44 at the Dolores."

Cyrus saw a movement that confirmed the desperado's announcement.

The iron blade had no glitter; its surface was dull and dark.

"Have you stopped praying for mercy?" the Major went on.

"Yes! I will never ask ask it again at your hands. You are Andros Ruby, the New York thug, who with four men committed robbery and murder one night in that city. You told me at the Dolores that if I gave you away you would have my life. You called me Jasper Judd. In an evil hour, when I was employed in the banking-house of Sharpe, Dodge and Company, I fell, and became a criminal. Men of your stripe helped me to ruin, Andros Ruby. I am not sure that your hand was not in my downfall. I fled to the West and under another name I was trying to wipe out the past till you came. I did not think you would know me. I called you Andros Ruby to your face in your room and there you threatened to send me back to New York. I resolved to brand you and to flee. I did so, but some unlucky fate has guided me into your clutches. No; I do not beg for mercy any longer. Add another crime to the long list treasured up against you. I am in your hands."

Major Blister could not conceal his chagrin over these words firmly spoken by the youth who looked up into his face. The voice did not quaver, the young man's eyes had no fear in their depths now.

"Curse you! you might have left Custer without denouncing me," said the Major.

"But I did not."

"No, you would not! Come! we must put an end to this. I am playin' a cold game against this iron dagger and its mate. I want no stumbling-blocks in my way. Are you ready to die, Jasper Judd?"

The reply came from an unexpected quarter. There was a slight noise at the side of the path, and the next moment a figure alighted at Blister's side.

"I think you are wanted in camp," said the new-comer addressing the Major. "Mark the Unknown has just arrived."

"Heavens!" ejaculated the desperado dropping the clerk's arm.

"It is true! I saw him just awhile ago. You know that I would not lie to you, Major. I am Quartz Kid, your pard, an'—"

"I will go, but first let me attend ter this tarantula that bit me ere he left Custer," and he started toward Cyrus Slinkum who had started back.

"Not leave him to me," said Quartz Kid planting himself firmly between Blister and the youth. "Go to Coyote an' settle with the iron blade before it gets to work again. Go now."

"By heavens, I will!"

The next instant the two youths were the only occupants of the spot where a moment before Cyrus Slinkum's life was not worth a copper. They looked into each other's face for some time without speaking.

"I never expected to see you here when I told the Major about the papers," said Quartz Kid, breaking the embarrassing silence.

"And I never thought to wander into Camp Coyote," was the reply.

"You must wander out again," the boy spy went on. "Major Blister will never forgive the deed you did before you fled from Custer. He will hunt you down for it. Don't thank me for coming here in the nick of time, Cyrus. I pity you. Between the crime in New York and Max Blister's hatred, you will have a terrible time, I fear. We have never been close friends, but I never hated you. You must not go back to Coyote. Your trail lies in another direction."

"I will thank you first, anyway," said Cyrus,

seizing one of Quartz Kid's hands, which was quickly jerked away.

"No, thanks; you owe me none. Mark, the Unknown, is the man to thank. He came to Coyote at the right time to do you a service. Go away, Cyrus. Keep off of Major Blister's trail. For God's sake, steer clear of Camp Coyote!"

"This land is a wilderness to me," was the reply. "I can't go back to New York. I could never face the men whose trust I basely betrayed. I wish to Heaven I were dead!"

"Not while you have a chance to live down the past!" said Quartz Kid. "From the bottom of my heart I pity you, Si Slinkum, but go—go! This is no place for you."

The boy spy of Custer City turned away.

"Go I will, and may Heaven have mercy on me, if I deserve any!" he heard a voice say.

Then he took several steps forward before he looked back. Where Cyrus had stood, no figure was now seen; the fugitive from justice had gone away.

"I did him a service after all, an' I'm glad of it," said the young Custerite. "I hope I may never meet the young man again. If he ever falls into the clutches of Major Blister the second time, he will not get off so well. Now I'll go back to camp, for Mark has come and the game of the iron dagger will be resumed."

Cyrus Slinkum was stumbling down the dark trail when Quartz Kid turned back toward camp. He had sent Max Blister ahead with the startling information that the owner of one of the terrible iron blades had come to Coyote, and the mountain trap set by Major Blister and Wild Alaric had caught its intended prey at last.

The boy was eager to reach the camp. He was certain that he had not mistaken his man, for he had seen Mark, the Unknown, standing erect between two cabins with his deep black eyes watching the liquor-den where Cyrus had been captured.

For some distance the boy ran over the ground, and he reached the camp pretty well blown.

"Thar's been nothin' excitin' hyer yet," he said. "They haven't met, but thar's no tellin' when they will. It is blade ag'in' blade now, for the Major holds the one that pierced his back."

Quartz Kid went toward Wild Alaric's cabin on the hunt of Major Blister. He had nearly reached the door when it suddenly opened and the very man he sought stood before him.

"Where is he, Major?" asked the boy.

"At Terrapin Tom's ranch. Alaric has gone down to take a look at him first. I heard you coming, and I thought you were Alaric. Ah! hyer he comes."

A moment later the well-known figure of the tiger sport of Coyote appeared in view, and the Sport of Two Cities exhibited an anxious face as he came up.

"He is there, sure enough," said Alaric; "but he is not the man the boy has named."

"He is! I saw him myself," exclaimed Quartz Kid. "Don't I know the man who calls himself Mark?"

Wild Alaric looked down into the boy's face with a smile.

"Don't dispute Wild Alaric, boy," he snapped, with sudden fierceness. "Mark the Unknown did not come ter Coyote ter-night, but ther other one did!"

Major Blister started.

"What other one?" he cried.

"Ther man with ther gray eyes," said Alaric.

"Very well; it doesn't make much difference. We've set the trap for them both, and both must die," he grated. "Gray eyes or black—I don't care which pair comes. I have an iron blade for all. Come, Alaric, show me this man!"

Wild Alaric did not hesitate but started off immediately with Major Blister at his side.

"Come along an' see ther circus, Quartz," laughed Alaric over his shoulder, and the boy spy followed them.

Two minutes later the Sport of Two Cities, with the iron dagger concealed along his sleeve, entered Terrapin Tom's den, and stopped for a second at sight of the man who stood at the bar.

All at once he sprang forward with an exclamation that came from clinched teeth, and landed at the counter.

"Is this yours?" he said to the man, who turned upon him, and the iron blade came into view. "I know it is! No falsehoods hyer! I'm goin' ter return it with the proper interest!"

The man coolly laid one arm on the counter and fixed a pair of steel-gray eyes upon the tiger sport.

"Very well, Major," was all he said.

CHAPTER XVI.

OUT OF ONE TRAP.

THE Sport of Two Cities expected to confront a cool man, but the *sang froid* of the gray-eyed man almost staggered him.

This "Very well, Major," sounded like a challenge, and the steely glitter of his keen eyes was a danger signal that could not be avoided.

Major Blister stepped back while the man looked at him. It was not Mark the Unknown;

that Sport had black orbs, and was not cast in the same mold as the Satan-eyed person who confronted him.

Wild Alaric regarded this striking tableau, ready to join in at a signal—a look from his pard.

"That man is a cool tiger," said Alaric to himself. "He is one of ther two we've set the trap for, but he is yet able to use his claws. Ther Major is surprised—ther eyes ar' gray instead ov black. Sail in, Major; Alaric is on hand."

For several moments the two men at the counter looked at each other with the interest of hate.

"So this blade is yours?" suddenly cried Blister glancing at the iron dagger clutched in his right hand.

"Yes."

"You know whar I got it?"

A faint smile was the reply.

"In my back!—between my shoulders at the Dolores!" the Sport went on, his eyes getting new and fiercer fire as he proceeded. "It is your blade you say. Then, by heavens! you put it whar it war found."

"I'll have to take the credit of doing so, I see," said the man.

"You are the man who mesmerized Quartz Kid an' took from him the letter intended for me!" flashed the Major, irritated by the stranger's coolness.

"I am the man!" came the reply so impressively spoken that Major Blister almost recoiled another step. "I got that letter and a sorry catch it was, too. It didn't pay me for the trouble, Major Max." And the speaker let slip a low laugh. "If you want your own you can have it. I have carried it ever since in my pocket. Ah! here it is."

A hand disappeared suddenly beneath the stranger's vest, and a moment later a well-worn envelope dropped upon the counter a few inches from the Major's hand that rested near the edge.

"That is it," the cool head continued. "I have restored your property."

Major Blister did not pick the letter up, but kept his fierce eyes fixed on the man. Suddenly he executed a signal which Wild Alaric understood for that tiger sport stepped forward.

"That's the man, Major!" cried Quartz Kid, who leaped into the bar-room at that moment, and covered the stranger with outstretched finger. "I have found the letter-taker at last! Thar stands the mesmerizer who robbed me at the Dolores! I—"

"He has confessed," interrupted Major Blister. "The letter has been restored, but that isn't enough."

"What more do you want?" asked the gray-eyed man.

"Satisfaction for the blow at the hotel!"

"Oho!"

"Yes!" the Major leaned forward and threw the word with a hiss into the stranger's face. "We know that we ar' hunted by two iron daggers—one in the hands of the sport who calls himself Mark the Unknown, the other in the grip of a man who is known as—"

Blister paused to give his enemy a chance to name himself.

"Go on!" was the response.

"I don't care who you are!" cried the Sport of Two Cities. "The other blade is yours. We came from Custer ter Coyote ter set a trap hyer. You have walked into it. The game you have played is going ter end hyer to-night—the career of one of the two blades has reached its close!"

"Very well, Major."

These three words were exasperating; they cut like a two-edged knife as they fell from the stranger's tongue.

As they were spoken for the second time the owner of the iron blade straightened, and for the first time threw a searching look at Wild Alaric who showed the readiness of a tiger cat to leap forward.

"Shut the door, Quartz!" said the Major.

The boy spy of Custer sprang back and obeyed the command, then he waited for the duel which he believed was about to be fought.

"I know that man, Major," suddenly exclaimed Wild Alaric. "It is all clear to me now. I saw him walled up one night two thousand miles from hyer. That man is Fred Ferret, the Broadway Spotter."

"Is that true?" cried Major Blister, starting toward the cool head who received Wild Alaric's words with the utmost composure. "Are you the man from New York?"

"Your pard knows," was the reply. "If Gideon your messenger were here, he could clear the mystery. But why deny the truth, Major? The cell under Mother Redbird's trap has another occupant, but he is not the man walled up there four years ago."

"Then you are Fred Ferret?"

"I am the man known East as the Broadway Spotter—the man who was hot on the trail of Andros Ruby and his companions when he was caught in an infamous plot and left to die under ground. I have found you at last, Major Blister. I have found Wild Alaric once called Dangerous Dan in New York. Another man found

Night-Owl Oll, and Poker Perry. I came too late to give those two devils the blade that hunted your heart at the Dolores. In this game I play for myself. I suffered a thousand deaths in that New York dungeon, but still I face you. Let Mark the Unknown play his own hand; we are not fellow-conspirators. The game I play is distinctly my own, I say."

"Then we will see it played out hyer!" said the Major. "Now that we know you as Fred Ferret, our New York victim, we will play accordingly. This is not Mother Redbird's trap; you can't bribe the keeper of this den. This is Camp Coyote, and by the stars that laugh above it to-night! Fred Ferret, you die whar you stand!"

"Whar he stands!"

These three words shot from the lips of Alaric almost before the Major had pronounced his last.

The Coyote Sport and Fred Ferret were not separated by ten feet, and the next second Wild Alaric dashed straight at the caged man.

It was a plunge for which the quickest man alive could not prepare. The Broadway Spotter had not time to throw up a single hand; he could not touch a weapon—the tiger sport of the Black Hills camp was upon him like a thunderbolt!

The furious collision threw the Spotter back and almost off his feet. The next moment he was forced against the counter, and the bronzed fingers of Wild Alaric were claspings his throat.

This—the plunge forward and the forcing back—was the work of a second, and it seemed to take that length of time for the detective to act.

All at once his hands went up; they grasped Wild Alaric's wrists like an electric vise, and the next instant the Coyote sport found himself hurled away as if he had unloosed a spiral spring!

Striking the heavy leg of a table Alaric was thrown to the floor and before he could rise the New York tiger had turned upon the Major.

"When you entrap a man, kill him at once!" he said beating down the hand that had drawn a revolver. "The next time the iron blade will not make its way between your shoulders. I won't take your life to-night, Andros Ruby. I don't want it now. But the next time we meet, look out!"

While he spoke he was holding Major Blister almost at arm's length, and his gray eyes were looking him through and through.

"You'd better play your hand out hyer an' now!" exclaimed the Sport of Two Cities.

"No, not now!"

All at once the Major found himself free, but he was standing no longer beside the counter. A quick display of strength had fung him away, and he was in the middle of the saloon, bewildered by the sudden change of front.

Fred Ferret coolly picked up the iron dagger that lay on the counter.

"When this blade comes back, Major, beware!" he laughed, holding it up before the big Sport's eyes. "It will come back, too, as sure as there's a heaven above us! Good-night! The next time strengthen the jaws of your mountain trap!"

A long stride carried the Broadway Spotter almost to the threshold. The two pards and the astonished Quartz Kid saw the heavy six-shooter in his right hand. The iron blade had already disappeared.

"Gentlemen, I am alone. I can be followed. You are two and I am one," he went on. "This game is not for gold. I am playing for vengeance—not ail for myself, but for vengeance just the same. If you abandon this camp, you will find me at your heels till the game has been played out. The man called Mark the Unknown has struck two down out of the five who robbed, murdered and walled men up in New York. He got ahead of me. He has struck his last man; the two left belong to me!"

His feet touched the threshold of the saloon as the last words were uttered, and a moment later the New York Spotter had disappeared.

"Jehosaphat! what tiger d'ye call that?" said the pale face that came up over the counter as Fred Ferret passed out into the night. "He has ther strength ov a Samson. Why, he handled yer, Major, like ye war a child, an' Alaric thar—"

"Silence!" roared Major Blister, striding toward the astounded bartender. "We let him get away on purpose. Our grip warn't jest what we wanted. By the Furies! if you tell in Coyote that we warn't enough for him, you'll mix drinks in Tartarus!"

Then the Major whirled upon Wild Alaric, who, with a cocked revolver, was glaring at the open door as if he expected to see the New Yorker come back.

"What about Gideon's dispatch now?" exclaimed Major Blister. "It said that that man-tracker was still the inmate of the Mulberry street cell, but he is hyer! Gideon played us false. Wait till I get a chance to clutch the liar's throat! Jupiter! Fred Ferret is a cyclone!"

"I knew thet when he war at our heels in New York," said Wild Alaric scarcely taking

his eyes from the door for a second. "He took ther iron blade off, didn't he?"

"Yes and said that when it came back we'd know it."

"Which we probably will," smiled Alaric.

The last speaker walked to the bar without waiting for the Major's reply and called for a drink.

"I should have shot him down without a word—I see it now," muttered Blister. "The next time it will be trigger argument wherever we meet. I had the tiger in the trap, and like a fool I let him go."

By this time Wild Alaric had finished his drink and the next moment he came toward Max Blister with a singular twinkle in his eyes.

"Slipped through our fingers, didn't he, Major?" he laughed. "The next time let me spring the trap."

"You tried it to-night. You went at Fred Ferret like a tiger, but he threw you off as if you war a baby."

Wild Alaric felt the force of the words thrown out like daggers.

"Remember that you had him in yer clutches for a minute before you face him!" he suddenly said. "Don't throw this failure at Alaric's feet. It belongs to you, Major. If ther iron blade comes back, as he says it shall, don't blame this pard for the coming. By Jerusalem! he won't stand it!"

With a haughty gesture, and eyes that suddenly lost their twinkle, Wild Alaric strode madly toward the door.

"Don't desert me," cried the Sport of Two Cities, springing forward, fear suddenly taking possession of him. "I'll let you set the next trap, and spring it yourself. I won't have a hand in it. I gave Fred Ferret too much string to-night—I see it now."

"All right!" was the reply. "If I had handled affairs hyer ter-night thar'd be a dead man along that counter. I accept ther trust, Major Max. From Alaric's trap an' Alaric's trigger thar shall be no escape!"

The sport of Coyote shook the Major's hand from his sleeve, and repeated his last two words with a mad emphasis.

CHAPTER XVII.

ADELE IN COYOTE.

GIDEON GOLDBIRD did not believe that the young woman riding at his side over the mountain trail intended to go to Camp Coyote, yet as mile after mile was passed over, he regarded her with perplexing interest.

"If I can only get her thar!" he said more than once to himself. "She most likely knows that ther camp would prove a bad place for her, if ther Major and Wild Alaric ar' thar, yet hyer she keeps straight on as if she intends ter ride inter ther very jaws of death."

Adele was not disposed to talk, and for several miles, the singular journey was conducted in silence.

Gideon watched her like a hawk. He seemed eager to leap at her throat, but such was not his intention, for he wanted to take her into Coyote where he would confront her with Major Blister and his pard.

All at once Adele turned upon the Custer sport and their eyes met.

"How did you get away, Gideon?" she suddenly asked.

"From that hole under Mother Redbird's den?" was the reply.

"Yes."

"Not by ther same means that got Fred Ferret out," said Gideon, grating his teeth. "I don't owe my escape to the tigress who betrayed us four years ago, an' let ther Broadway Spotter go. I war met on ther pier by a man who never ceased ter shadow me till I war in ther trap."

"How do you know that, Gideon?"

"I choked it out ov ther tigress herself!"

Adele looked astonished, and Gideon burst into a laugh.

"It is true," he went on. "I choked my news out ov ther old bellion with these yaller hands! I war three days in ther darkness of that underground place. It made a madman out o' me. One night I heard a noise beyond the wall. I got down an' listened. Somebody war foolin' with ther bricks; I could hear 'em distinctly. For two hours I never moved; sometimes I didn't seem to breathe. I was afraid I would frighten that somebody off. I could not imagine who it was, but while ther noise sounded like a rat gnawin', I knew it war a man's fingers. At last ther bricks war removed, an' I war called in a whisper, but not by my own name. Ther voice said: 'Ar' ye alive?' an' ther next minute I war at ther hole myself. Instead of a full-grown man, I found a dwarf—a misshapen creature that looked like an ape. He called himself Ajax, an' it took him no time ter tell me that he hated Mother Redbird, an' thet in helpin' me out, he war fightin' her."

"I felt like embracin' thet man-ape in all his ugliness," laughed Gideon continuing. "He war my friend because he didn't like ther boss hag ov ther Mulberry street trap. Arter a rest in ther cellar, we proceeded ter leave ther house. I follered Ajax up-stairs. We reach-

ed the half-darkened hall without any accident. The man-ape war creepin' ahead an' I war at his heels. All at once a door opened at ther side ov ther hall an' thar stood Mother Redbird as large as life. I stopped an' jerked loose from the skeleton hand that clutched my wrist. If thar had been a tiger on each side ov ther giantess, I would have done just what I did. I sprung at the witch ther moment she set eyes on me, an' before she knew who I was, she war in ther room beyond an' I war chokin' her with a pair ov hands thet took pleasure in ther work."

"Did you kill her, Gideon?"

"No; but I wish I had!" was the answer. "I wish from my soul I had! I forced her ter swear eternal silence about my escape. I made her tell me about the man who met me in the cell when I went thar ter view ther bones ov Fred Ferret. I found that he had met me at the pier, had shadowed me to the hotel, an' had preceded me ter ther Spotter's dungeon whar I war caught. I made Mother Redbird reveal all this. Word by word I choked it from her villainous heart. I know that a certain telegram from Sidney sent the night I left thar for New York prepared ther man called John Leopard for my comin'. That war your work, girl!"

Gideon Goldbird was looking into Adele's face when he finished. His eyes were full of accusation, and his brown hands were tightly clinched.

"Your work, my tigress! Don't deny it!" he went on.

"I do not," was the fearless reply. "Yes, I posted John Leopard, Gideon. You had a narrow escape!"

"Was it ther intention ter let me die in that dungeon?"

"I guess it was."

"Who is this John Leopard? What does he want ter avenge?"

"He is my friend," said Adele coolly.

"Oh, yes! I might have thought that."

"You did not leave the city immediately after your escape?"

"No. I war taken ter ther house ov Ajax, ther man-ape. Thar I lost my mustache an' hid for many hours. I stole from ther city at night, but I longed ter find John Leopard. I wanted ter drive a bullet through his head."

"New York is not the Black Hills, Gideon," smiled the girl.

"I know that, but I would have killed that man if I had found him. Never mind! I will get him yet."

"When, Gideon?"

"When we have played our game out hyer!" snapped the Sport.

There was no reply, but Adele looked into Gideon Goldbird's face in a manner which told that she did not believe his prophecy.

"Wait an' see!" continued the Sport. "I want ter report ter ther Major. I war forced ter send a lie over ther lines. He believes that Fred Ferret still inhabits Mother Redbird's cellar. Ther Broadway Spotter had escaped."

"Your master, the Major, may already be in possession of this fact," said the girl.

"Who'd inform him?"

"Fred Ferret himself."

Gideon seemed to recoil in his saddle.

"He will find among ther Black Hills ther men who walled him up in ther New York den. We have profited by experience. Ther mountain traps never let ther wolf escape."

"We shall see, Gideon," laughed Adele.

During the rest of the ride there was but little said. The Custer Sport saw the night slowly give place to another day, and with the last lofty mountain behind them, the pair came in sight of the cluster of cabins called Coyote.

Instinctively Gideon Goldbird glanced at the girl. Her eyes were riveted upon the camp with a singular curiosity.

"Thar it is," ejaculated Gideon. "I tell yer plainly, Adele, that yer' likely ter find enemies thar if yer go down."

"We are going down," was the quick answer, firmly spoken.

Gideon could hardly conceal the delight this resolution gave him.

"All right!" he grated. "I ask no better, my tigress."

One hour later the two strangely met companions rode down into Camp Coyote, and not until they reached the suburbs of the place could Gideon fully believe that the girl was going to enter.

Nobody came out to greet them, for they had entered Coyote unseen and unannounced. The sun was up, and the mountain birds were making music among the bushes.

All at once a tall man in dark brown garb stepped from a wooden shanty and stopped short at sight of Gideon and his companion. His curiosity was seen to increase as they rode up.

"Thar's a specimen Coyoter," said the Sport, glancing at Adele. "I have never been hyer afore, but they tell me that this is a reg'lar catamount den. Whenever a Coyoter showed up in Custer thar war a fight."

The solitary man continued to eye the two riders until they had almost reached him. He stood like a statue before the house from which he had just stepped, and his gaze wandered from the girl to Gideon and then back again.

"Is this Coyote?" asked the sport as both horses stopped before the man.

"Coyote."

"Ar' yer satisfied now?" said Gideon smiling as he turned to Adele.

"Perfectly!" and then she looked at the tough. "I have traveled all night. Have you a place for me to rest in?"

Gideon was the man most amazed by the question.

What! was Adele going to sleep in the camp that probably held Major Blister and Wild Alaric at that moment? Did she court the jaws of the merciless trap set by two desperate men?

"You kin hev my shanty ef ct's good enough," the Coyoter said.

"It ar' no Crystal Palace, girl, fer we don't hev thet kind o' shanties hyer, but if Burt Browne's nest ar' good enough for a daisy, like you, come an' hang up thar."

"I will go," said the girl with a smile. "Anything is good enough for me. I will see you later, Gideon," she continued to the astonished Sport. "We have had a pleasant trip, and I part from you with genuine regret. Good-morning, Gideon."

The girl was riding away guided by the stalwart figure of Burt Browne before the Custerite found his tongue.

"I didn't throttle her among ther mountains an' she did ride inter Coyote!" he suddenly exclaimed. "That girl is as cool as ther thug John Leopard who run me down in Gotham. She comes boldly ter Coyote whar she knows ther Major an' Wild Alaric must be, an' now she goes ter sleep right in ther very jaws ov what will prove ter her a mountain trap. Let 'er go. My duty is ter find ther Major an' report."

He sat in the saddle hardly knowing in which direction to proceed.

"Hello, pard!" suddenly rung out a voice, and Gideon turned at the sound. "Ar' yer a friend ov ther cyclone thet war in camp last?"

Gideon found himself confronted by a man who was looking up into his face.

"What did the cyclone do?" he asked.

"Oh, not much! He only threw Wild Alaric half-way across my saloon, an' walked away from ther man called Major Blister."

"Heavens! then Alaric an' ther Major ar' hyer?"

"They war last night, anyhow. Yonder is Alaric's shanty, an'— But yer' off, I see! Something important no doubt!"

Gideon Goldbird was already riding toward the little cabin designated by the Coyoter's outstretched finger. Yes, it was, "something important."

At the door of the hut the messenger-sport drew rein and slipped from the saddle. The next moment the door opened and a voice that thrilled him said:

"Come in, liar!"

Gideon had advanced to the very threshold of the cabin; he could not retreat now. If he had intended to do so he was roughly frustrated, for a great bronzed hand darted forward and closed on his shoulder. The next instant he was jerked inside.

"Wal, you ar' back, I see," continued the same voice that had branded him a liar. "You had to telegraph a lie to Sidney from New York, an' then, ter cap ther climax ov perfidy, you fetch ter Coyote the very woman we don't want ter see hyer! That your message was a lie we know ourselves, for Fred Ferret has been hyer. You lost your mustache somewhar along ther line, Gideon. I have a notion ter deprive you ov yer head!"

Gideon Goldbird did not attempt to break from Major Blister's grasp.

"I kin explain satisfactorily, Major," he began.

"Listen to him—I will not, Alaric!" hissed the Sport of Two Cities. "If you catch him in a lie, report to me. My opinion is that you war a fool for comin' back at all, Gideon!" And Major Blister went out, leaving the pale sport with Wild Alaric.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE MARK OF DOOM.

It is safe to say that the mad Major left a breathless man in Alaric's cabin when he went away.

Gideon Goldbird expected no such reception from the man whom he had served East and West. He began to believe that he was a fool for coming back to Custer when there were a thousand and one hiding-places in the East; but he had come back, and now he was compelled to put up with consequences that promised to be very unpleasant.

"When did ther Major go crazy?" were the first words he stammered when the cabin-door had closed on the form of Blister.

"You don't want ter put thet question ter ther individual mentioned," said Wild Alaric with a smile.

Gideon glanced at the door; he half-expected to see the Major come back.

As the portal did not open, he opened the narrative of his trip to New York, and the thrilling adventures that followed his arrival in Gotham. Alaric listened without one intermission, and

for several moments after Gideon closed, the sports did not speak.

"So ther girl—Adele—has come ter Coyote," said Alaric at last. "As she sent the dispatch that put John Leopard on yer track in New York, Gideon, I don't see how yer kept yer hands off o' her."

"I did it with difficulty," said Gideon, who did not think it worth while to state that if he had lifted a finger against Adele during the ride, he would have got a bullet in his head. "I thought I'd find you an' ther Major hyer, an' thet's why I didn't pay her in crimson coin for thet telegram. Won't ther Major give me a chance ter explain how I came ter send ther dispatch he got?"

"I'll do that, Gideon."

"I don't want any patched-up peace," said Goldbird quickly. "If he doesn't want me hyer, by heavens! I kin go elsewhar."

A smile broadened at the corners of Wild Alaric's mouth, and he leaned forward and laid one finger gently on Gideon's sleeve.

"Whar would you go, Gideon? We ar' now between two iron daggers."

Gideon started and suddenly grew pale.

"If it's that bad, hang me! if I know whar I would go; but I'd go somewhar," he said. "From a remark dropped by ther Major afore he left, I infer thet one ov ther iron blades is wielded by Fred Ferret, ther Broadway Spotter."

"It is."

"An' ther other?"

"By a man known as Mark ther Unknown. He is ther man who has done ther killin' so far. He found Night-Owl Oil in Coyote, an' Poker Perry in Custer, an' ther iron blade did its work."

"Hasn't Fred Ferret struck yet?"

"Oh, yes. Ther Major got ther dagger between his shoulders, but his constitution fetched him through. Gideon, do you think you'll go away now?"

"No! not while we have those two men ter fight!" exclaimed Gideon, as if imbued with the courage of a lion in an instant. "We three men must fight this game through, then I go back ter New York an' pay my respects ter John Leopard. Major Blister may not let us explain, but he shall not drive me off. I am hyer ter stay. I'll grow another mustache, an' when I take it to Gotham, the man who corraled me thar must look out! Fight it is, Alaric! war ter ther knife! What ar' yer plans?"

Wild Alaric, who sat on a rough table, while Gideon occupied a three-legged stool, looked down into the eyes that fairly flashed. Despite the loss of his mustache, Gideon Goldbird once more looked like himself, and Alaric had seen his courage tested more than once.

"Stay hyer an' we'll give you work," the Coyote sport said. "I am captain now. Ther Major has turned this campaign over ter me. I am ter set ther trap thet's ter catch ther iron blades."

"Give me yer hand—thar!" And the hands of the sports met in a silent pledge of renewed pardship.

"Burt Browne took the girl in," Alaric went on. "We saw him from ther window, but thet means nothin'. Burt Browne is but one man, an' his influence in Coyote is limited. Let her sleep in his shanty whar she is. We may use her ter bait our trap. I'm glad you picked her up on ther way, Gideon."

"She picked me up," laughed the messenger-sport. "I don't want ter play with thet woman. I can't forget thet she sent me straight ter Mother Redbird's cellar. I could choke her ter death."

"But you must not. Keep your hands from her."

"Then let her stay out o' my sight."

The conference broke up and the two sports appeared in the main street of the camp. It was new to Gideon, but not unlike several mountain camps he had already seen.

Alaric conducted him to the most important place in Coyote, Terrapin Tom's, where he was introduced to several inhabitants of the camp. Gideon noticed that he was strangely eyed by the men, and at the first opportunity he whispered in Alaric's ear:

"In God's name, why do they eye me so? I'm no boss-thief! I expect ter be charged with murder within ther next five minutes!"

Wild Alaric could hardly keep back the laugh that bubbled to his lips. He, too, had noticed that Gideon was closely scrutinized, but there was something about him that claimed attention. The loss of a mustache worn so long had given Gideon a cadaverous appearance, and his adventures in New York and his flight had not yet had their marks effaced.

Gideon bit his lips under the stares he received, and invited the crowd up to the counter. The invitation was accepted with much reluctance; some men hung back and looked sullen.

"I'm under suspicion, an' I haven't been hyer three hours yet," muttered Gideon. "I wish they'd tell me what they think I've done."

At that moment a tall man in a dark shirt with a wide, sailor-like collar, touched Wild Alaric, and led him to one side.

"Ther crisis is comin'," murmured Gideon when he saw the two men halt a few feet from the bar. "I am goin' ter know what all this eying means. One thing I know—Wild Alaric will stand by Gideon Goldbird to ther end."

He did not pretend to be much concerned in the whispered conversation between Alaric and the Coyote, but the quick and stealthy glances he threw at the pair belied his outward mien.

At last Alaric came toward the bar, his eyes fastened on Gideon. The man with the wide collar came forward also.

"Gideon, old boy, when you lost yer mustache you made yerself like a man who is wanted mighty badly by Coyote," said Alaric in tones heard by the bronze spectators.

"I thought it war suthin' like that," said Gideon. "You told 'em, Alaric—"

"Yes, I told Crimson Con, thar, thet you war my pard, thet you'd been thet for years, thet you never war Lariat Lige thet man wanted by this camp."

"Warn't thet satisfactory?"

"Not quite, Gideon. They demand a test."

"What kind of a test?" asked Gideon.

"A very simple one, sir," said Crimson Con who stepped forward as he spoke. "We demand to see the back ov yer right shoulder."

"For what ar' ye lookin'?"

"For a mole Lariat Lige had thar," was the reply. "It is a simple test, an' you'll not object. Ther man we want once inhabited this camp; he killed our alcalde five years ago an' got away. He war yer build exactly, his eyes war like yers, you ar' ther image ov Lariat Lige. Wild Alaric whom we respect, tells us thet you ar' Gideon Goldbird, always hev been thet individual. We hope you ar'. But in order ter settle this question for sartain, we must see ther back ov yer right shoulder."

Gideon winced; the men all saw it, and silently a dozen stalwart fellows drew closer.

"It's not much of a test, Gideon," said Alaric aloud, laying his hand on his pard's arm. "Throw off yer blouse an' bare yer shoulder. One glance will confirm my statement, an' suspicion will vanish. Come, old fellow; off with yer blouse."

But Gideon stood like a statue before the crowd. He attempted to speak, but the words seemed to lose themselves before they reached his lips.

"Hurry up!" said Alaric.

"I can't," whispered Gideon at last. "I am not Lariat Lige—you know that, Alaric—but thar's a mole on my right shoulder!"

"Won't you submit to the test?" asked Crimson Con. "We can't stand hyer all night. If you ar' not Lariat Lige, you will not hesitate ter show up; if you ar', by Jupiter! we'll strip you ourselves. Come, Gideon Goldbird, as Wild Alaric calls you. Bare yer shoulder!"

"I need not do that, for strange ter say, gentlemen, thar is a mole on my right shoulder, but I swear by ther eternal heavens, that I am not Lariat Lige!" said Gideon, forced to the wall by the words of the Coyote leader.

"An' so will I!" said Wild Alaric solemnly. "I give you my word of honor, gents of Coyote, that that man never was anybody but Gideon Goldbird—"

"We'll see ther mole first," said Crimson Con with provoking coolness. "I know exactly whar it is on Lige's shoulder, an' so do a dozen men in this camp. We play fair, Alaric."

Wild Alaric bit his lip and looked at Gideon. "Thar's not likely ter be two moles in ther same place on different men," he said. "Show up an' satisfy 'em, Gideon."

Sullenly the messenger sport stepped back and drew his blouse. He glared from beneath his long black lashes like a noosed tiger at the cool and silent men who confronted him, and he cursed the day that saw the sacrifice of the waxed mustache.

The drawing of the blouse or jacket showed that Gideon was fully armed. He wore a belt above which protruded the butts of two heavy six-shooters, and between them in its leather sheath stuck an eight-inch bowie.

All eyes were fixed on Gideon while he doffed his clothing, and the sports of Coyote seemed to hold their breath.

"Hyer it is! now look for yerselves!" growled Goldbird as he drew his shirt over his shoulder, and turned his back to the crowd. The shoulder was entirely exposed by the action, and Gideon ground his teeth as the men leaned forward.

Sure enough there was on his shoulder a mole about the size of a silver dime. It was plainly visible on the white skin exposed to the crowd.

Gideon could not see the eyes of the Coyoters but Wild Alaric saw them. He saw the men lean forward with gaze riveted on the strange mark, and he could hardly repress a cry.

"This is ther man!" suddenly said a deep voice. "Thar can be no mistake; ther mole is in ther right place. This is Lariat Lige, ther Outlaw ov Coyote!"

With the last word a heavy hand dropped upon the bared shoulder of Gideon Goldbird, and with a startled cry the man turned.

"It is a lie! I am not your outlaw. Ther mole is ag'in' me, but by Heavens! I am Gideon Goldbird only!"

Crimson Con took no notice of Gideon's vehement declarations, but turned coolly to Wild Alaric.

"We'll have ter claim this man," he said. "He may have deceived you, Alaric, but a dozen men in Coyote will swear that he is Lariat Lige."

Gideon uttered an oath, and his hands leaped to his revolvers.

"Not ter-day!" said several men at once, and six hands closed on his arms. "You war a fool ter come back ter Coyote, Lariat. You didn't hev ter come."

Before a reply could be made or another word spoken, there came to the door a person entirely unexpected.

"Great Jupiter! a red-skin!" ejaculated one of the men, and in came a well-built Indian in more than half-civilized garb.

The scene by which he was confronted seemed to surprise him, but he came on without a second's hesitation and walked to the counter.

Something in his manner enchaind the attention of the whole crowd. He had the blackest eyes that ever twinkled in a human head.

Terrapin Tom seemed to know the Indian's wants, for he set down bottle and glass, and a drink was quickly taken. The next second the red wheeled upon the hard crowd whose proceeding he had interrupted.

"Gray Arrow wants that man!" he said, covering Gideon with his finger.

"Not ter-night!" growled Crimson Con. "This is Lariat Lige, an'—"

No wonder the speaker stopped; the crowd was looking into two revolvers in the Indian's hands!

CHAPTER XIX.

UNLUCKY GIDEON.

"Ther Major war right. I war a fool for ever comin' back hyer," gasped Gideon Goldbird, seeing the new state of affairs. "I don't know thet I'd better myself by fallin' inter this Injun's clutches. He says he wants me, an' I don't know 'im. Mebbe they'll fight for me—ther Coyoters an' this blazin'-eyed red."

Gray Arrow, as he called himself, stood erect as a statue, and a pair of steady arms held the two revolvers in the faces of the astonished crowd.

"In Satan's name, what d'yer want with thet man?" cried Crimson Con. "Ye'r not his pard, ar' yer?"

"Gray Arrow wants the white man!" was the reply. "The men of Coyote will give him up, or Gray Arrow will shoot!"

"Give him up an' shoot ther Injin in ther back when he turns," whispered a man at Crimson Con's elbow. "He can't get away with Lariat Lige even with him in his hands."

It was evident that the Indian had spoken his last words. His eyes and his fingers intended to do the rest.

"This man is my pard. I am Wild Alaric," said a voice, which had not spoken before since the red-skin's sudden coming.

Gray Arrow fixed his piercing eyes upon Alaric for a moment.

"Your pard, eh?" he said.

"Mine! This man is Gideon Goldbird."

"He is Lariat Lige!" hissed half a dozen men. Wild Alaric bit his lip and let his hand rest on the butt of a revolver, but a look from Gideon kept the weapon in the belt.

"Take him!" he said, to the Indian. "But remember! that for all harm done to him I will call you ter account!"

A significant glance passed between the two pards, and Gideon stepped toward the red-skin. "It's fryin' pan an' fire," he muttered. "An' my opinion is thet thar's precious little difference."

He stood under the protecting revolvers of the Indian and awaited results. Held at bay by the outstretched weapons, the men of Coyote glared at the red with tigerish eyes; he held them at his mercy.

Slowly Gray Arrow began to move back followed by Gideon who seemed to be fascinated by the black eyes that glamed behind the polished pistol-barrels. He did not offer his back to the Coyote pards, and madly they bit their lips. The door was reached without interference, and Gideon and his strange preserver stepped out.

Inside the Coyoters surged forward, but the voice of Wild Alaric brought them to a halt.

"I wouldn't interfere with that red-skin," he said.

"Do you know him?"

"No, I am willin' ter swear that I never saw him before he came hyer."

"He is Lariat Lige's pard," growled Crimson Con.

A faint smile appeared at the corners of Wild Alaric's mouth.

"So you still believe that he is Coyote's outlaw?" he said.

"We do—ther mole on his shoulder proved it."

"It was merely a strange circumstance. Five years ago you say Lariat Lige killed the alcalde?"

"Yes."

"Five years ago Gideon Goldbird had never

seen Camp Coyote. We were together in New York. My friend Major Blister who was there also will confirm me in this. Gentlemen, I must stand by the man rescued by the Injun."

"Very well. I am afraid that a hundred oaths would not convince Coyote that he is not Lariat Lige. Whar ar' they now?"

The men who went to the door saw nothing of Gideon Goldbird and his red rescuer.

"One thing is sartain," said Crimson Con. "It will not be safe for Lariat Lige ter set foot ag'in in Coyote. We hev all ther respect in ther world for you, Alaric, but ther evidence ov ther mole on ther shoulder settles his identity."

Meanwhile Gideon Goldbird and Gray Arrow had passed beyond the cabins, and were moving down a trail that threatened to bury itself soon among the mountains.

The astonishment of the messenger-sport had not abated in the least. He walked beside the Indian like a man who could not realize the terrible events that had taken place.

The charge, the evidence of the birth-mark, the Indian's arrival and the rescue seemed the parts of a wild dream to Gideon, yet the presence of the red-skin at his side told him that it was stern reality.

"It was a close shave, Gideon," suddenly said the red, looking into Gideon's face. "Don't you wish you had never come back?"

Gideon started. What did this Indian who spoke very good English know about his visit East?

"Don't I wish I had never seen ther Black Hills?" ejaculated Gideon. "Because I have a mole on my shoulder, those men war goin' ter noose me for a man called Lariat Lige."

"They'll do it yet if they get a chance, Gideon," laughed the Indian. "I believe I'll take you back ter Coyote an' turn you over ter Crimson Con and pards."

"Angels ov mercy, no!" cried the sport. "Give me a chance an' I'll let them clutch me if they can. I came back hyer ter be called a liar by ther man I served, an' then Coyote wanted ter eat me blood raw. You're no Injun."

Gideon had stopped and was looking into the red-skin's face.

"What makes you think so?"

"Your eyes."

The next instant Gray Arrow burst into a laugh.

"No, I am not an Indian," he said. "Gideon Goldbird, I am the avenger of blood and the game I play may know fifty disguises before I get to the end. Listen to me. I did not expect to see you in such a desperate situation when I came to Coyote. I came for quite another purpose than to rescue you; but the moment I reached Terrapin Tom's an' saw you with bared shoulder before the Coyoters I knew what had happened. I happen to know that the man called Lariat Lige is dead, but that fact would not have saved you, Gideon, if I had not interfered. If my eyes tell you that I am not an Indian, do they tell you who I am?"

"No."

"Gideon Goldbird, I am the man called Mark."

"Mark the Unknown?" exclaimed Gideon recoiling a step, with a pair of wild eyes fixed on the strange being.

"Mark the Unknown, the man who has followed a trail over two thousand miles," was the reply. "I am the owner of the iron dagger. It found Night-Owl Oil in Coyote and Poker Perry in Custer. As the sun shines it will find Major Blister and Wild Alaric. It has found Gideon Goldbird. Like a fool you came back from the East to feel the point of the blade that has been consecrated to a work of vengeance!"

Gideon heard the man through like a person receiving a death sentence. His hands got cold at the finger tips; he was at the mercy of the iron dagger.

"Come along, Gideon," Mark suddenly went on, and his hand closed suddenly on the sport's wrist. "The place of execution is still some distance ahead. To-night the remaining two will know that the trap set in Coyote for me will not hold anything. Ha, ha! when Andros Ruby and his gang try in the wild West to live down the crime committed in New York, they fail sadly."

"I did not help that night," said Gideon. "I swear to Heaven that I merely stood guard. I war compelled—"

"No excuses—you were *there*; that is enough!" was the interruption.

Gideon caught the speaker's eyes and said no more.

Mark the Unknown led his prisoner deeper into the mountain. The trail grew suddenly narrow at times, and then would widen for a little spell. To Gideon they were moving into a *terra incognita*.

When the strange man halted they had reached a place where no sunlight touched the trail. Far above them rose bare walls of dark gray stone, and Gideon knew he was in one of the many little canyons in which the Black Hills abound.

Was this to be his death spot?

He thought even at that terrible moment of his promise to the stage driver of Custer that he would come back some day the possessor of a

mustache as fine as the one he had lost. But now he stood on the brink of doom, and he expected to see the iron blade which had been so fatal to two of his comrades, sweep downward before his eyes.

All at once Mark the Unknown stepped back, and Gideon stood free.

"Don't congratulate yourself, Gideon!" laughed the Unknown. "I hold you in my hand, even though ten feet separate us. See! I can throw this blade into your heart with the precision of a practiced juggler."

The avenger clutched the point of a blade whose hilt was iron, and when he finished he suddenly raised it poisoning it above his head as if for a throw.

"Ain't I ter have a chance?" asked Gideon.

"None!"

"It's ter be murder, then?"

"I call it vengeance, Gideon. Don't you wish you had never come back?"

It was the same question, and the same cutting taunt.

"Don't I wish I had ther dead drop on ther merciless devil?" grated Gideon. "I am ter be dropped hyer like a wolf wounded an' run down. Fool I war ever ter come back hyer. Gideon Goldbird, yer time has come."

Fifteen feet from him stood the wickler of the iron blade. He still looked like an Indian whose role he had played so well, but Gideon saw a look in his eye that told that his hatred was not that of the red race.

"I avenge here the crime committed one night four years ago in New York," he suddenly went on. "There is another iron blade on the track of the men who did the deed, but it would avenge personal torture in Mother Redbird's den."

"I know—the other man is Fred Ferret," said Gideon. "I helped to wall him up in the underground prison. I have been ther myself. I know what it is."

"Better for you to-night, Gideon Goldbird, if you had remained there," was the response. "There you would have a grave, here you will have none. Gideon Goldbird, are you ready?"

The messenger-sport shut his hands and closed his ashen lips.

"Ready?" he said to himself. "I'm one ov ther kind that ar' never ready, but my time is hyer an' ther settles it."

Yes, his time had come.

Suddenly the iron blade seemed to leap several inches higher in the avenger's hand, and he threw one foot forward.

"You ar' the third man, Gideon," he said. "After you comes Wild Alaric!"

The next instant the knife left the uplifted hand and whirled through the air. Gideon who had watched the last movements threw up his arm instinctively and uttered a wild cry as the blade struck!

For a second he kept his feet despite the penetrating dagger, but he suddenly recoiled, spun half-way around and dropped near the foot of the wall.

Mark the Unknown did not leave his tracks for several minutes. With triumph gleaming in his deep black eyes he stood and looked at the man who lay a few feet away with the hilt of the avenging blade above his breast.

"This man was the least guilty of the five," he said aloud, "but his hands were red all the same. I would to Heaven that I had never shed a drop of blood, but they made me an avenger. Major Blister and his pards fashioned the iron dagger from the bar with which they took a human life that dreadful night in New York four years ago. So there is a trap set for me in Coyote, eh? I will test its strength."

He glanced at Gideon again and walked away, destined to feel the terrors of Wild Alaric's trap.

CHAPTER XX.

THE TWO MESSAGES.

LET us go back to Camp Coyote.

Major Max Blister did not see the rescue of Gideon at Terrapin Tom's by the disguised avenger, and he knew nothing of the event until told of it by Wild Alaric when they met.

"Let Gideon go," said the Sport of Two Cities. "I don't believe more than half of his story about the lying message that came over the wires from New York. Gideon Goldbird never went to Mother Redbird's; his courage failed him when he got to Gotham. We can play the game through without him. Let 'im go!"

Crimson Con and pards were not so willing to let the man called by them Lariat Lige remain beyond their grasp. They stole from camp and followed "the Indian" and his captive. They found the trail, and were gone several hours; when they returned their countenances told that the hunt had been unsuccessful; Gideon was gone.

Thus the day went down with no more exciting events. Major Blister and Alaric had watched Burt Browne's cabin with eager eyes. Adele, who had come to camp with Gideon, was there. Since entering it with Burt himself, the girl had not been seen, and the long shadows came with her still on the inside.

Quartz Kid, the boy spy of Custer, had not

been idle during the day. He had kept one eye on the cabin and another on the man's trail that entered Coyote. He had forgotten Cyrus Slinkum whom he had saved, as we have seen, from the vengeance of Major Blister.

When the sun went down the boy left his post, and moved to another nearer the cabin that held the girl. Quartz Kid was anxious to cross its threshold, and to see what was going on on the inside. He could not believe that Adele had passed the whole day in sleep.

If he had entered the little cabin, he would have found the girl near the window seeing more than he thought she was seeing. She had been refreshed by a sleep on a cot furnished by the owner of the cabin, and it was past noon when she awoke and looked out upon that part of Coyote observable from the little window.

It was Starlight again when Major Blister laid his hand on Wild Alaric's arm and whispered:

"I want to know what that girl is doing. She came hyer with Gideon; she is hyer for a purpose. Remember! she has been seen with Mark, the Unknown."

"Let Adele go for the present," was the answer he received. "We want ther wielders ov ther iron daggers. Fred Ferret slipped through our fingers at Terrapin Tom's; ther other one—Mark—is yet ter come."

At that very moment Quartz Kid had reached Burt Browne's shanty, and was listening under the little window. His figure was not observable as he hugged the logs and strained his ears to catch the slightest sounds. If a cricket had chirped beyond the door, he would have heard it.

"I'd give my left ear ter see in thar," muttered the boy spy. "Something mighty important brought ther strange girl ter Coyote. She keeps housed up like a sick person; hasn't showed herself since Burt Browne showed her ter her quarters. Mebbe she is hyer because ther gray-eyed man isn't far off. They're connected, I know, but just in what way is what I'd like ter find out."

Quartz Kid seemed to have reached his wit's ends, for although but a few inches of wood separated him from Adele, he might as well have been miles away.

Nobody came to the cabin to disturb the boy's vigils. He saw his patience ooze away at his fingers' ends as it were; he was in despair.

At last, and so suddenly that it sent a thrill through Quartz, the cabin door opened and Adele's face appeared. If the boy had not been crouched under the window at that moment, he would have been discovered. As it was, he thought for a moment that he had been seen.

Adele looked down the darkened street bordered by little cabins, and listened attentively. Then the breathless boy spy heard her say:

"So this is Coyote. I wonder what has become of Gideon, and whether they will find the place."

"Gideon, my fine bird, has gone away," ejaculated the boy, but not for Adele's ears. "Yes, I think *they* will come by and by. If they knew you were hyer, Adele, they would surely come. Ah! thar you go!"

The last words were spoken as the girl drew back leaving the door slightly ajar as keen-eyed Quartz could see.

"Hit or miss I'm goin' ter have an interview," said the boy, edging toward the door. "I guess ther's shrewdness enough in me not ter give anybody away an' I want ter know more ov this girl who plays a cool hand whar it takes an almighty cool hand ter win."

The following moment the boy was at the door, and an instant later he pushed it wide enough to admit his body and glided inside.

Exactly as he expected, he was discovered in a second.

"What do you want?" exclaimed Adele, as she pounced upon Quartz Kid, before he could utter a word and encircled his arm with her white fingers. "You are still in Major Blister's employ, I see. This is not Custer City, boy; this is Coyote!"

"Whisper to me something I don't know," laughed the young spy. "If this war Custer, we'd not be meetin' in Burt Browne's shanty, miss. Surprised ter see me hyer, eh? I'm liable ter turu up anywhar an' at any time. I thought ye'd hit this camp."

It was nearly dark in the cabin, but the twain were near the door, and the boy could see the start with which Adele received his last sentence.

"So you looked for me? Did—"

She checked herself suddenly as if she had reached dangerous ground.

"I don't think they've seen you," said Quartz. "Ter tell ther truth, Adele, you struck camp at an early hour an' thar war nothin' ter get ther Major an' Alaric out at thet time."

"Where is Gideon?"

"Gone away."

"For good?"

"I shouldn't be surprised," answered the boy, remembering the manner in which Gideon Goldbird left Coyote. "Do you want ter see him?"

"No; let him go."

Adele shut her lips firmly behind the sentence.

"We came to Coyote together," she laughed. "He thought I would not come because I was likely to find the Major and Wild Alaric here. Well, I have not seen them yet."

"An' perhaps yer won't ef you stay hyer all ther time," said the boy. "I kin tell yer, Adele, they don't intend ter interfere with a woman first."

"Really, don't they Quartz?" laughed the girl, shaking the boy merrily. "How kind those gentlemen are!"

"Thet's sarcasm; you don't take my medicine," cried Quartz Kid, drawing back.

"No," and Adele spoke suddenly with striking seriousness. "Before morning I will be visited by one or both of these pards. Major Blister interviewed me in Custer the night Captain Cressy and his Vigilantes took Mark from my house, and when he left, it was with a threat of future vengeance in his eyes. I am confident that he knows that I am now in Coyote. Ah! he is a sleek one, Quartz; but I need not tell you this. You know it."

"Don't I?" queried the boy. "This man, Major Blister, will fight ther iron blades ter ther bitter end, an' my hat on it, Adele, he will come out with ther last stakes in his fist!"

"Very well; if he can get them, I will not object. Go and tell him that I am here, Quartz; tell him that Adele, Mark's friend, is ready to receive him whenever he chooses to call."

"You don't mean that?" cried the boy, staring into the girl's face. "You don't mean ter invite ther Major hyer?"

"I mean nothing less," was the reply.

"He might not make it pleasant for you if he came," stammered Quartz Kid.

"I will make the visit agreeable to him," was the answer, in a light, mocking vein. "Will you hear a message from me to your master?"

"I—don't—know."

"Oh! yes you will! Go to Major Blister, an' tell him that Adele is ready to see the man of the night of the second of May!"

"Jehosaphat!" exclaimed the boy. "I saw thet date mentioned on the sheet of paper I found in your house in Custer. Ther Major warn't called Max Blister thar?"

"Perhaps not. What did you do with that paper?"

"I showed it ter ther Major himself."

"Well?"

"He said it war a lie out o' ther hull cloth."

A sneering laugh rippled over the girl's lips.

"The villain!" she cried. "But go to him, Quartz. Take the message I worded a while ago. You will do this?"

"Hang me if I don't!" said the boy. "You will not run away?"

"From that man? No! Remember—I wait here for the man of the second of May. That is a date Major Blister is not likely to forget."

Quartz Kid found himself at the door before he was aware that the interview had ended.

"I recollect that I was once ther bearer ov a message from Mark the Unknown ter ther Major," he murmured when he found himself on the outside of the cabin. "That war ther time he turned ther handle ov ther iron dagger an' saw a message fall out. Now I am ter tell him that Adele wants ter see him. I didn't make much by ther interview, did I? Kind ov a bad investment, strikes me." And with a look over his shoulder at the cabin-door, which was shut, he hurried away.

Adele returned to the little window, and waited quietly for the man for whom she had sent.

There was a singular gleam in the girl's eyes, and it seemed to increase as the seconds wore on.

Five minutes passed away; nobody came. Adele began to grow restless.

"Must I go out and hunt him myself?" she said. "Did I send too pointed a message to Andros Ruby? I am in his trap, as he calls it. Why don't he come?"

While she spoke, the man for whom she waited was moving upon the cabin. Quartz Kid had found him, but not at Wild Alaric's cabin; he had been picked up at Terrapin Tom's.

"Wants ter see me, eh?" chuckled the Major. "By Jehu! if I take a notion, it may be ther dearest meeting she ever sought. Wild Alaric talks about keeping her ter bait his trap for Mark, ther Unknown, an' Fred Ferret. I don't know about that. I will not promise thet I won't finish ther interview with my yellow fingers behind her windpipe! She is too dangerous to be permitted to play a side-game when we have ther iron blades ter fight."

He was on his way to Burt Browne's cabin while he spoke thus. The girl was still waiting calmly for him at the window alongside the door.

"Major!"

The Sport of Two Cities stopped and turned toward the voice.

"Gideon is gone for good," continued the stalwart man, who reached Blister by another stride. "You hadn't left ther cabin twenty minutes before I heard suthin' strike ther door on ther outside. Quick as a flash I war out thar myself, an' what d'yer think I found?"

"Heaven knows!"

"This—stickin' in ther wood almost half-way up ter ther handle."

And Wild Alaric laid in the Major's hand a terrible-looking dagger with an iron handle.

"Hades an' horns!" exclaimed Blister, seizing the blade. "Let me see—is it the one whose handle turns?"

Alaric looked on while Major Blister essayed to turn the hilt of the dagger. It moved, turned, and then separated from the blade.

"A paper—a message from the black-eyed hunter!" said Blister, as a bit of paper dropped from the hollow hilt.

"We'll read it by match-light!" cried Wild Alaric, and the next moment a match flashed up in his hand.

"I suppose it is another threat," the Sport of Two Cities growled, as he unfolded the message. "Hyer we ar', Alaric! Listen:

"The blood on my blade is Gideon's!"

"IRON DAGGER."

"I could hev guessed thet," exclaimed Alaric. "When I saw that blade stickin' in ther shanty door, I said, 'Thet means Gideon.' So it does."

Major Blister threw the paper to the ground and crushed it under his heel; then he reunited the two iron pieces, and looked into his companion's eyes as the match flickered and went out.

"I'm going ter begin now!" he cried.

"Whar?"

"At Burt Browne's cabin!"

"Not on thet girl—ther bait fer my trap!"

"Hang yer trap!" burst out the Major. "I can strike two men a master blow to-night, an' in Coyote at thet. I'll do it! I'll promise you one thing, Alaric—I'll not use ther iron blade on her!"

The next second Wild Alaric was alone!

CHAPTER XXI.

BEFORE THE TRIGGER.

"You had best follow that man; that's my opinion anyway," said a boyish voice at Wild Alaric's elbow, and the Coyote sport turned and looked into the face of Quartz Kid, the young spy.

"Why, Quartzy?"

"Because she's waitin' for ther Major with a purpose. Her eyes said she'd do thet when I left her in the cabin."

"Let him go," said Alaric, looking after the man who had already disappeared. "If he goes ter bite an' gits bitten, it will be his own fault."

"Oh, certainly not; but if you have any regard for him, mobbe you'd better look arter him a little—thet's all."

The boy turned away, but he had not taken six steps when a hand grasped his arm.

"Did you see anybody nigh my shanty awhile ago?" said a stern voice, as he stopped and looked up again into the face of Alaric.

"I warn't lookin' for any suspicious person thar," he said.

"Then you didn't see ther iron blade come back."

The eyes of the boy instantly dilated with wonder.

"Did it come back?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Who brought it?"

"Ther killer with ther black eyes, I guess, fer it war ther bowie with ther hollow hilt."

"War thar a message in it?"

"Yes. It told ther Major an' I that it had just finished Gideon."

"Then he fetched it ter Coyote!" exclaimed Quartz Kid. "Has the Major got ther dagger now?"

"He has. He went off mad enough ter drive it inter ther girl's heart."

"But he won't!" cried the boy. "Adele is Major Blister's match. Yes, as you say, Alaric, if she bites, let him blame only himself. Let us do some work now. Ther black-eyed man may be in Coyote yet. Thirty minutes have not passed since ther iron blade came home. I'll stake my head that he is still in ther shadows of ther shanties. Whar's yer trap set?"

"Wherever I find him!" hissed Wild Alaric.

"If he is hyer we will find him. Let us begin at once."

Leaving Major Blister to meet the strange girl pard waiting for him in Burt Browne's cabin, the Coyote and Quartz Kid started out on the hunt of Mark the Unknown.

The dagger was undoubtedly the same one which had taken Poker Perry's life in Custer; the hollow handle was proof of this, and the writing that proclaimed the end of Gideon Goldbird was the same that met the Major's eyes after Perry's death.

Quietly and with eyes on the alert, Wild Alaric and his boy companion searched the camp. They seemed to see everything, and their trained ears missed no sound.

"He did go away, sure enough," said the Coyote sport when he and Quartz Kid came back to the cabin with the knife-marked door. "He only came ter stick his accursed blade in hyer ter let us know that he had wiped out another member ov ther New York five. Like a coward he would not stay, Quartzy. He must 'a' guessed that Wild Alaric's traps always hold."

I'll wait for ther Major hyer. He didn't intend ter hold a lengthy interview with ther girl. Promptness war in his eye when he went away. He must be comin' soon." And Alaric looked toward Burt Browne's cabin as he concluded.

Quartz Kid bade the sport good-night and walked off.

"I'll go down ter ther shanty an' see for myself," he murmured. "My private opinion expressed ter Wild Alaric is that ther Major didn't get ther best of ther angel pard. He's a tiger, I know, but he'll find ther girl his match."

Wild Alaric went back into the cabin and dropped upon a stout stool at a rough table an' in the light of a tin lamp that occupied a shelf just above his head.

He had nothing to do but to wait for the Major, and to occupy the time with any thoughts that intruded themselves.

"Mark saved ther Coyotes a job," he said to himself. "They would have given themselves no rest until they had found ther man called Lariat Lige. It war a strange coincidence—that two men should hev a mole in exactly ther same place. Gideon never was Lariat; he could not have been that man for five years ago, when the alcalde ov Coyote war killed, we war in Gotham in other bizness. Poor Gideon! he got out ov ther fryin'-pan inter ther fire. I wonder if he died game?"

Wild Alaric sprung up almost before the sound of the last word died away.

The door had opened without the slightest noise apparently, but Alaric knew that it had been pushed ajar.

The bronzed hand of the mountain and city desperado was on one of his revolvers; the lock clicked coldly as it left the belt.

"You will not touch your trigger, Wild Alaric, as they call you here," said a voice. "I have come for a moment's chat an' on business that concerns us both. Sit down!"

The last sentence was a command which made Alaric wince. He already found himself covered by a revolver in the hand of a man who was his physical equal and whose eyes were of a cold, steely gray!

"Fred Ferret!" exclaimed Alaric as he went back to the stool before the leveled weapon.

The man laughed low and with biting coolness.

"The man you left in Mother Redbird's dungeon four years ago," he said. "You haven't changed much, Alaric. You look like the same man who used to crack safes and beat men to death with iron bars."

The sport of Coyote started and moved uneasily on his seat.

"You've changed your name, I see," the Broadway Spotter went on. "Let me see: what were you called in Gotham?"

Alaric made no reply, but bit his lips anew and looked at his tormentor as if he wished looks could kill.

"Never mind," laughed Fred Ferret. "We'll pass that and call you Wild Alaric, a name which I hear fits you splendidly now. My old fellow, do you recollect what I said to you last ere you turned from me in the Mulberry street black hole?"

"Ov course I do!" snapped the Coyote sport.

"Well, I am here! I have come, Alaric, with an iron dagger which is the counterpart of that one wielded so mercilessly by the man who calls himself Mark. There is one slight difference in the two blades; the hilt of his turns and carries messages, the handle of mine is fixed. Mark is not to have all the glory of this vengeance hunt which began in New York. I am here to deprive him of part of it now."

"Ter-night?"

The question bubbled to Alaric's lips without the slightest effort.

"Yes—to-night!"

"All right!"

The man of Coyote left the stool with the suddenness of a person hoisted by a torpedo. He leaped up despite the menace of eye and revolver.

"I am ready! This game can be played by two."

Fred Ferret was taken aback, for a movement like that executed by the Coyote would have beaten the most alert.

The wrist of the New Yorker was clutched in an instant, and instead of laughing in Alaric's face, he saw Alaric's eyes flashing in his own!

"My trap is always set!" cried Wild Alaric, and his revolver looked into the Spotter's eyes. "Wanted ter see me, eh? Wal, hyer I am, Mr. Ferret! Coyote is worse than Mother Redbird's dungeons ter sertain men! Ther next time shoot yer men on sight!"

It was a wild tableau which the little tin lamp saw. There was "shoot" in Wild Alaric's eyes; he was not the man to give the iron blade a chance to get the upper hand.

"Bizness is bizness!" he hissed over his revolver. "I never play with a mouse in the trap. Fred Ferret, the end of yer man-hunt ends ter-night in Coyote."

The deadly six-shooter dropped a trifle lower, and the tiger eyes of Wild Alaric took on a new glare.

In another second the head of the man from

Gotham would have stopped a bullet, but before even that brief period ended, a figure sprung across the threshold, and Wild Alaric felt his right arm grasped.

"You kill that man on your peril!" said a voice, as the baffled rough looked with an oath and a scowl into the face of the interferer.

"Is it you, girl?" he cried. "Whar's ther Major?"

"In the first place, let that man out," Adele went on, for the person who had come was the young girl.

"I will not go," said the Broadway detective, lifting his revolver again. "I came here to pay a debt incurred one night in New York. You know all about it, Adele."

"There he is," said the girl, pointing at Wild Alaric. "I shall not lift a hand. One of the two survivors of the five is at the mercy of your revolver."

The occupants of the cabin heard the teeth of the Coyote rough crack as he straightened, and he blanched not before the revolver which again had the upper hand.

"Turn about is fair," he grated. "I never kick when I'm under ther table."

All at once a loud cry came into the shanty from the outside, and at the same moment almost somebody reached the door.

"Alaric! Alaric! quick! for heaven's sake!" was the cry. "Gideon has come back, an' they're goin' ter noose him for Lariat Lige!"

A wild ejaculation burst from Alaric's throat. What! Gideon his old pard alive, and back?

He knew the voice outside; it was Quartz Kid.

"They swear he is Lariat!" continued the boy and the next moment the door opened. "Gideon is nearly dead, but they say that—"

Quartz Kid stopped abruptly, and stared at Fred Ferret and Adele. He seemed to take in the situation at a glance.

"By Jupiter! They've got yer, Alaric," he exclaimed. "It's a shame ter let a pack ov men-wolves hang a dyin' man when he isn't ther galoot they want. They call you Fred Ferret, eh?—the man who came all ther way from New York for vengeance! If you don't let Alaric help Gideon Goldbird in his terrible strait thar's not a speck ov manhood under yer skin. That's ther opinion ov Quartz Kid ov Custer City."

The boy's rebuke was cutting in its intonation.

"I guess I'll hev ter help Gideon myself," the young spy went on. "I'm only one ag'in' twenty, but a man's a man if he has been a city villain."

Quartz Kid stepped back with a final glance at Fred Ferret.

"If I send you to help Gideon will you meet me afterward?" the detective said to Alaric.

"Yes! Name yer place."

"The two big rocks just outside of Coyote. You know where they are?"

"Bet yer life!" cried the desperado.

"Then go and help the neck in the noose."

Wild Alaric turned and cleared the threshold with an eager bound.

"This way," said Quartz Kid who kept at his side. "I'll show you the wolves who have Gideon."

CHAPTER XXII.

COOLING A HOT-HEAD DOWN.

ADELE'S appearance at Wild Alaric's cabin in time to save Fred Ferret's life was proof that Major Blister had not avenged himself upon her.

We left that worthy on his way to Burt Browne's cabin eager to meet the girl who had sent for him by Quartz Kid, and the coming of Adele between Alaric and the detective seems to demand our return to him.

Major Blister never reached the girl's quarters in time to see her.

When near the cabin he was touched by a man who said quietly, when the Major had let slip an oath:

"You don't want ter go on in thet humor, Major Blister. Come with me till you cool off."

The speaker was Burt Browne himself, tall, stalwart and with a face of bronze.

"The young lady is in my cabin, and you shall not disturb her now," the Coyote went on.

"But she sent for me," snapped Blister.

"I don't care if she did," was the answer. "You don't see her in that humor. Why, you'd choke her."

"Mebbe I would an' I don't know who has a better right."

The Sport of Two Cities stepped back, but Burt Browne followed him up.

"Thar is one place whar I'm lord, an' that is in my own shanty," he said. "Ther girl—Adele—is thar, I say, an' no man shall disturb her without my consent."

There was resolution in the dark eyes of the big Coyote.

"Come with me," he went on suddenly, linking his arm within that of the Custer Sport. "We'll walk yer temper off, Major. You will cool down presently."

Major Blister drew back at the touch, but Burt Browne did not release him.

For once the Sport of Two Cities had found his match where he was not looked for, and before he could remonstrate he was being walked away while Adele waited for him by the little window of the tough's cabin.

"Is this the way you do business in Coyote?" asked the Major, when he had been walked to the suburbs of the mountain camp.

"Sometimes," smiled the tough.

"Wal, it's not square treatment," flashed Blister. "I'm going back."

"Oh, no! you're not cool yet," was the reply.

"If you must see Adele, Major, you must do so with no hot blood in yer head. We'll extend our walk."

"Never!" and Major Blister broke from Burt Browne and started back. "Hot or cold, I'm going back to the camp!" he went on.

"Then I go along!" was the quick retort, and Burt stepped to the Major's side again. "Not so fast, Major. We'll take our time to it."

Major Max ground his teeth and was forced to obey. He darted lightning glances at the man at his side, but made no reply aloud.

"I'll remember this interference," he muttered. "One of these days, Burt Browne, I'll call you to account for this work. You have cooled me greatly! My fingers itch to choke the girl who waits for me at the shanty!"

The two men went back through the mountain camp, the Major eager to meet Adele, and Burt Browne in no hurry to witness the meeting.

"Hyer we are," Burt said, halting in front of his cabin. "Now, Major, you will see the beautiful creature who sent for you."

The big tough of Coyote opened the door himself, and motioned the New York Sport inside. The next moment the Major stepped across the threshold.

"Here I am, girl," he said. "You never send for Max Blister in vain."

There was no reply and the two men saw by the little lamp that occupied a shelf fastened to the logs that the cabin had no tenant.

"She is gone! This is your work, Burt Browne!"

The Major wheeled upon his companion with fire in his eyes.

"Your work!" he went on. "If you had not walked me beyond this infernal camp, I would have found the girl. You knew of this."

"By my life, I did not," said Burt Browne, whose countenance showed that Adele's absence was a surprise to him. "I fully expected to find her hyer. Shall we wait for her?"

"She will not come back. She repented of her action and was afraid to meet me here! She ought to know by this time that I am not to be fooled with."

"I am sorry," commiserated the Coyote tough, while a smile appeared at the corners of his lips. "I am sure the girl will come back. I—"

"Thar! Burt Browne, you have become the ally of this girl who calls herself Adele," interrupted the Major. "I tell you that she shall never play out her part of the game."

"Her part ov what game?" queried Burt. "Is it in any way connected with ther comin' ov Fred Ferret ter Coyote?"

"It is; it is closely connected with it. She shall never play it out, I say! You have made yourself her ally; you are that girl's friend!"

"I am, by Jericho!" blurted Burt Browne. "Since things have come ter this crisis, Major Blister—since you an' Alaric ar' ag'in' her—she will find a friend an' an ally in Camp Coyote! Look me in ther eye an' don't misunderstand me. I, Burt Browne ov Coyote, am that girl's friend. Ther man what touches her touches me! I guess that's plain."

It could not have been made plainer.

Burt Browne leaned forward while he spoke, and his face almost touched Major Blister's.

"I've heard a good deal since sunrise," the Coyote went on. "I knew something about ther iron blades an' ther work."

"Mebbe you'd guide them to the hearts they hunt!" flashed Max Blister. "We ar' not compelled to make Coyote the battle-ground. Alaric an' I can play our death game elsewhere."

Burt Browne laughed.

"You kin play it out hyer for all I keer," he said. "Ther moment I heard that you war daggered at ther Dolores in Custer, I said that thar war a blood leech after yer. Ther surroundin' circumstances told me this. Then, when I heard that Night-Owl Oil killed hyer in Coyote by a dagger ov iron war a pard ov yours, I had my belief confirmed. Stay hyer an' play out yer game, Major. You kin fight ther iron daggers in Coyote ter ther bitter end. But you must not touch ther girl who calls herself Adele!"

"For fear of you, eh?" said the Major, with a sneer.

"I don't want you ter fear Burt Browne. You hev only ter remember that he is her friend. That's all. Good-night, Major."

Before the Sport of Two Cities could frame another reply he found himself the sole occupant of the spot, and the heavy figure of Burt Browne vanished while he lo ked.

For several minutes he stood there with now and then an oath slipping through his teeth, then he suddenly turned and walked toward Alaric's cabin.

"The girl has played the coward at last," he muttered. "She hasn't the courage to wait for ther man she wanted to see. Ah! she weakens when the crisis comes; she runs from the fingers of Andros Ruby!"

A few lengthy strides carried him to the door and he stepped inside.

"Nobody hyer, either," he said, in no good humor. "Well, Alaric will not hear the report I am forced to make. Confound that girl! I wish I had her in my hands just now!"

He did not know of course, that Adele tired of waiting for him at Burt Browne's had gone to Alaric's shanty to hunt him up and that she had arrived in time to baffle the Coyote sport, and to render Fred Ferret a very important service. If he had known this, it is probable that he would have cursed anew.

The Major saw with mingled chagrin and rage that Alaric's cabin was empty.

"Always dry, Alaric has gone to Terrapin Tom's for a drink," he said. "Ty Jovel mebbe somebody will hunt me up if I stay hyer. I have the iron blade that Mark the Unknown drove inter this door after finishin' Gideon. It was stolen from me once in Custer but it has come back, this time to stay till I give it back to its owner! I'd like ter have the other one, to lay 'em side by side. I'll have it by an' by. Ah! they don't beat Andros Ruby—not even with daggers like this!"

The New York sport had drawn the iron dagger from an inner pocket and was cying it in the lamplight while he spoke:

"What is this?" he suddenly exclaimed.

There are letters cut into this blade with steel. It is a motto of some kind—the work of Mark the Unknown, Adele's pard. That man is a crank. I never saw these letters before; he put them here after the blade was stolen from me in Custer. 'Five times one are five' which means, I suppose, that five men have been doomed to be killed, one at a time. We'll see about that. I live, Alaric lives. Tracked from Gotham to the Black Hills need not mean that the trackers shall succeed! I swear before Heaven that it shall have no such meaning!"

Major Blister went toward the door as the exclamation ended on his lips.

He did not reach it before it opened, and the figure of a boy dashed into the cabin.

"Quartz Kid!" ejaculated the Sport of Two Cities. "I am glad you have come. What have you seen—the girl or Mark? Speak!"

"Give a feller a chance ter collect his breath," said the boy spy, leaning against the table. "I've seen cool things done in Custer when the Vigilantes ruled ther roost thar, but what I've seen in Coyote ter-night discounts them all."

"What has happened?"

And the Major's hand clutched Quartz Kid's arm and jerked him forward.

"It war all on account ov Gideon—"

"Gideon?"

"Yes; he came back, yer know, Major."

"Alive?"

"Yes, an' I guess he's in that condition yet. They noosed him for Lariat Lige, but thar happened ter be in Coyote one man who is twenty tigers concentrated. Jehu! Cud! He would invade Hades an' eucher Satan!"

"Aha! Wild Alaric!" exclaimed the Major.

"I've seen that cool head tried before."

"Who said Wild Alaric did it?" cried the boy.

"The man I'm talkin' about is called Mark, the Unknown!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE BAFLED NOOSE.

THE startling intelligence brought to Wild Alaric's cabin, as we have seen, by Quartz Kid, to the effect that Gideon Goldbird had come back and was in peril of his life, was not untrue as shall now be seen.

It will not be forgotten that the messenger-sport received a blow from one of the iron blades in the hands of Mark, the Unknown, and that he was left for dead by the avenger on the ground where he had fallen.

In spite of all this, Gideon Goldbird had come back to Coyote, not unburt and not erect, but terribly wounded and on all-fours, like a leech.

His return was unexpected, and he had almost reached Wild Alaric's shanty when he was discovered by a man, who uttered an exclamation of surprise at sight of him.

"What fetched you back, Lariat Lige?" this man cried. "Don't yer know that ther mole on yer shoulder condemned yer a while ago?"

"I am Gideon Goldbird in spite ov that infernal mole," groaned Gideon.

"Oh, that's too transparent for this camp!" was the sneering reply. "I'll whistle up some ov ther boys, an' we'll see about that mole business."

The Coyote straightened and sounded a peculiar whistle in the ears of Gideon.

"Let me go ter Alaric's an' die thar," he said clutching the Coyote's leggings.

"Not much! Thar's a rope in this camp for Lariat Lige! Hyer come ther boys!"

The next moment several men appeared on the scene and the man who had discovered Gideon pointed at him with a smile of triumph.

"Thar he is, boys. Thar's Lariat Lige come back arter ther noose we've kept for him!"

The Coyoters darted at the helpless pard with ejaculations of joy.

"I've crawled back into the noose, sure enough," muttered Gideon. "In God's name whar is Wild Alaric?"

Ten minutes later the messenger sport was fully in the hands of the avengers of Coyote and he looked into the face of Crimson Con their leader. It was without mercy.

"Thar need be no trial over this man," he said. "Ther mole on his shoulder proves him Lariat Lige. All I hev ter say, he war a fool for comin' back."

Gideon shut his teeth hard and said nothing.

Crimson Con stepped back and turned to one of his followers whom he addressed in a whisper.

"Bring ther rope to ther big tree near ther ruined shanty. We go thar ahead ov yer."

The man turned away, and Gideon was placed between two men who stepped into the middle of the crowd.

It was at this juncture that Quartz Kid burst into Alaric's cabin with the news that Gideon's neck was in the avenging noose.

The tree designated stood a few feet from the last cabin on the western side of the camp and thither Gideon was conducted by the crowd.

The wound made by the iron dagger had told terribly on his stalwart frame. His blanched cheeks and sunken eyes which had the glare of a wolf's made him in appearance wholly unlike the handsome Gideon Goldbird of Custer City. He looked like a man who expected no mercy, and whose end was very near.

"For ther last time, an' in ther shadow ov death, arn't you Lariat Lige?" asked Crimson Con as he touched Gideon who was held up in the light of the torch that burned above the heads of the Coyote crowd.

"By the Eternal! I am not!" was the answer.

"But ther mole—"

"Hang ther mole!" interrupted Gideon. "Can't yer believe a man whose cheeks are now on death's counter waitin' ter be cashed? Ther Injun who took me from Terrapin Tom's turned out ter be Mark ov ther iron blade—no Injun at all! He knows that ther real Lariat Lige is dead."

"He can't prove it," said Crimson Con. "We see in you ther only Lariat Lige that ever lived. No amount ov lyin' will save yer neck. Ther night arter ther alcalde war killed we passed a decree ov outlawry ag'in' yer. Blood for blood, Gideon. Yer oughtn't ter growl at that."

The next minute a man came up with a coil of dark rope dangling from his hand.

"Stand up! Face ther music, Gideon!" said the captain of the Coyoters, and his hand dropped upon Gideon's shoulder. "I call yer by yer last name, yer see; but we don't hang Gideon Goldbird ter-night. It is Coyote settlin' with Lariat Lige!"

The noose was lifted above the head of the doomed sport under the tree, and it fell upon his shoulders to tighten suddenly by a quick jerk from a dark hand.

"Thar they are! Look, Alaric! The noose is about Gideon's head. It'll take grit ter tear him from ther men tigers ov Coyote."

Quartz Kid and Wild Alaric had halted a few yards from the spot where the execution of the messenger sport was about to take place. They saw the crowd and the bronze faces revealed by the torch; they heard Crimson Con's last words.

Wild Alaric stood erect with a revolver in each hand. There was a fierce light in his eyes, for the menaced man before him was his old pard Gideon.

Quartz Kid looked up into the sport's face and tried to read what was passing through his mind. He saw the compressed lips and the glaring eye, and he saw, too, the fingers that closed more firmly than ever about the stocks of his revolvers.

"Come!"

Alaric sprang forward as he spoke; he shot the boy one glance and that one sent Quartz Kid to his side.

"I am with yer, Alaric. Go on!" said the boy.

The time for interference had come, for the rope which encircled Gideon's neck had been thrown over a heavy bough, and six hands clutched it while their owners waited for Crimson Con's signal.

"Gentlemen, you don't hang that man!" suddenly rung out the voice of Wild Alaric as he halted ten feet from the crowd and threw up his hands. "I have told you that he is not Lariat Lige, Coyote's outlaw. I am hyer ter say he is not with the droppers I hold in my hands."

Before he had finished, he had the attention of the whole crowd and he was looking over his leveled weapons into the eyes of all.

"Don't dispute evidence that'd convince any jury, Alaric," came from Crimson Con's lips. "We want ther blood ov but one man; don't force us ter shed that ov two."

"Which is a threat ag'in' me," ejaculated Alaric. "Remove ther noose from that man's neck! I give yer two minutes ter do it in, men ov Coyote."

A strange silence followed Wild Alaric's words. The Coyote pards looked from Crimson Con to the man who stood under the bough with the lariat about his throat.

What! give him up because one man demanded him? It was too much like letting their alcalde go unavenged.

"One minute is up," said Wild Alaric. "Ther second one may not be as long as its mate. By ther eternal heavens! I will shoot my old pard Gideon loose if he is not released without it!"

"Let 'im shoot!" grated half a dozen men near Crimson Con. "It's only one ag'in' twenty. Ter-morrow ther mountain vultures will look down on Wild Alaric's carkiss. Let 'im shoot, cap'n!"

Suddenly there came another man upon the scene, a man from whom the whole set started.

"Mark!" cried Wild Alaric.

Gideon Goldbird recoiled a step, and uttered a startling cry.

"My God! ther demon with ther iron blade! the man who played Injun awhile ago in this very camp!"

Mark the Unknown already stood in the glare of the torch intended to light up the scene of Gideon's death. He wore no disguise now; the Indian garb and the savage paint had disappeared.

He now stood before the astonished pards of Coyote in his true character. An Apache in face and figure, erect as a staff, and terribly cool, he must have impressed the Coyoters that he was a man of nerve.

His hands held no revolvers out as did the dark ones of Wild Alaric. He walked toward the crowd with the semblance of a smile at the corners of his mouth. He could laugh and kill.

"I guess I'll take that man," he said.

"Lariat Lige?"

"No; Gideon Goldbird!"

"He took me once afore ter-night," gasped Gideon, shrinking away. "That man is ther Injun, Gray Arrow."

"I am Mark now, Gideon," was the answer. "I thought I had settled with you, but it seems not. Come!"

In despair the messenger sport whirled upon Wild Alaric and threw up his hands.

"What hev we been pards for?" he cried in a voice of last appeal. "Alaric, I am at ther gates ov death!—I am Gideon! For ther sake ov old pardship, shoot me down, or shoot me loose!"

The voice sent Wild Alaric one mad step nearer.

"Unhand that man!" he cried.

"Yes; give him to me!"

At that moment the revolver of Mark covered Crimson Con, and the thunderstruck pards of Coyote saw their leader shrink.

"I have not come here for nothing," continued the speaker. "You can choose between me and the man who calls himself Wild Alaric. If you throw Gideon Goldbird to him, or if you decide to hang him, I will drop Crimson Con of Coyote in his tracks. Take your choice."

Wild Alaric almost faced the man who had suddenly come between. He could look over Mark's revolver into the cool, stern face visible behind it.

"Thet's ther man I want ter catch in my trap," he muttered. "I will not kill him hyer, unless he forces me ter do it. What's ther use ov fightin' for a man whose chips ar' now bein' raked in by death? Take 'im!"

He sent the last two words to Mark in mad tones. Quartz Kid threw a look of astonishment into Wild Alaric's eyes.

"Give me one ov yer droppers," said the boy. "A man's a man if he is nearly a corpse."

Alaric dropped the two weapons and stepped back.

"Alaric! Alaric! is this ther test ov pardship?" cried Gideon Goldbird.

There was no answer, and the messenger sport reeled from the hands that held him.

Mark the Unknown sprang toward him, and the crowd instinctively gave him a pathway to Gideon's side.

All at once the avenger's hand fell upon the rough's shoulder.

"Come, Gideon!" he said. "It is better to be daggered alone than to be noosed in a crowd. I am Mark. Remember that ye'r one of the gold gang of Gotham."

Gideon seemed to be held up by the strength of the man who had reached his side. He fixed on Mark the Unknown a look of despair. The noose had been removed from his neck, and he no longer felt its accursed coil.

"This man is not Lariat Lige," said the avenger, throwing a swift look into the faces of the Coyoters. "Your outlaw is dead."

"Will yer swear ter thet?" asked Crimson Con.

"Yes."

"Then take your man!"

The crowd drew back, but sullenly, and like a pack of wolves.

"I am Lariat Lige!" suddenly exclaimed Gideon. "Men ov Coyote, behold in me ther man who killed yer alcalde. I'd sooner be noosed than daggered."

A laugh rippled over the lips of Mark, the Unknown.

"Take his word or mine, just as you please, gentlemen, but I take this man," he said.

Gideon winced. Crimson Con and his pards stood like statues and Wild Alaric was a silent spectator now.

A moment later, Gideon Goldbird found himself being hustled away by the cool head, whose fingers seemed to sink into his shoulders like the talons of an eagle. The right hand that hung at Mark's side clutched a revolver, and his eyes rested on Gideon.

"What ar' yer goin' ter do with me?" asked the messenger sport.

"You ought to know," was the reply. "A man in your position is hardly worth playing for, Gideon, but I would have gone through fire for you to-night. You are one of the five."

Gideon ground his teeth and caught the eye of the Unknown.

"Don't hope to see this game played through, for you never will," fell on his ear. "Wild Alaric refused to help you to-night. Do you know why, Gideon?"

"No."

"He is a man with a trap," laughed Mark.

There was no answer. Gideon fell into thoughtful silence, during which time his hands clinched suddenly.

"Alaric did refuse to help me," he muttered.

"If I could get out ov this sinner's clutches—if I could beat death off, I'd like ter show him that Gideon Goldbird knows how ter pay a debt like this!"

But there seemed no hope, and Gideon passed from Coyote for the second time that night, in the hands of Mark, the Unknown, and nobody followed to see his doom.

Nobody?

Ah! down that same trail stood a human figure, and his ears caught the sound of Gideon's approach. The man drew back and touched a silver-mounted revolver.

"Am I never going to deal a certain blow?" he said. "Wild Alaric promised to meet me after helping Gideon. He is coming now."

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE IRON BLADES MEET.

THE man waiting for Gideon and and his rescuer was Fred Ferret the Broadway Spotter.

He heard them down the trail, and while he listened a puzzled expression came to his face, and he wondered whom he was about to encounter.

Two instead of one!

The reader will recollect that Wild Alaric had agreed to meet the hunter at a certain place after he had helped Gideon. Fred Ferret had reached the spot and was ready to fight it out with one of the men he wanted. They would have the duel alone, and if he conquered, he would next deal with the captain of the New York gang, Andros Ruby now known as Major Blister.

The Spotter had a right to believe that Wild Alaric would come to the dueling ground alone, but now two persons were advancing toward him. He stood erect while he waited, and strained his eyes for a glimpse of the enemy.

"I am here to fight but one man," he said. "If two come however I will not shrink. I will shoot Alaric's pard on sight, and then have the duel with the Gotham thug with chosen weapons."

The Broadway Spotter did not have to wait long for out of the shadows that lay beyond the two rocks beside which he stood came two figures, and he saw that neither was Wild Alaric the Major's friend.

Fred Ferret stepped back, but the movement caught the quick eyes of the Unknown.

"Halt!" exclaimed Mark suddenly throwing up a revolver which instantly covered the detective.

Fred Ferret stopped and then went forward.

"Aha!" he said. "So it is you!" looking into Mark's striking face. "I was waiting for another man. Excuse me. I am not wanted here."

"You will not depart without my command," was the reply. "I know you now. It is strange that we have not met before."

A hasty stride had carried Mark the Unknown to the spot occupied by the New York hunter, and for the first time the two avengers stood face to face.

"Adele has told me about you," said Ferret.

"I know who you are."

"And she has told me of you," was the reply.

"Come down here, Fred Ferret."

The hand of Mark encircled the detective's arm, and he was being led away when he threw a look at bewildered Gideon Goldbird and exclaimed.

"Your man there may escape."

Mark laughed.

"The wounded bird will not fly far if he does try his wings," he said. "That man is Gideon Goldbird."

"Let me see him, then!" ejaculated the Spotter. "He went all the way from Custer to New York to see my bones in Mother Redbird's trap. I want to show him the gang's victim in the flesh."

Before Mark could restrain the Broadway

Spotter he had sprung forward, and Gideon recoiled when he halted suddenly before him.

"I am here, Gideon!" he cried, looking into the pale face of the wounded rough. "You did not find me in the old dungeon? No, no! I was in Custer when the Major sent you on that fool's errand. When you wall up another trailer, Gideon, you will remember the day."

"By Heaven! I will—as long as I live, too!" was the answer. "I see your eyes. They tell me that you are the man we shut up in old Mother Redbird's dungeon four years ago. Do you know John Leopard?"

"Yes."

"So do I! I'd give my chances of paradise ter hold a six-shooter before his face, Fred Ferret, I never hated you. I had ter do what Andros Ruby said then, but now, by my life, I hate that same man! Give me a chance to-night. That man yonder has taken me twice from the pards ov Coyote, an' twice did Wild Alaric refuse ter shoot me loose. Give me a chance, I say!"

"A chance for what?"

"Liberty!" said Gideon, his voice sinking to a whisper.

Before the detective could answer, a quick step sounded behind him.

"Leave the blabber alone; I want to see you, Ferret," said the voice of Mark, and the Spotter turned away.

"Mebbe my chance will come," murmured Gideon, while the two avengers walked away. "I am a bird thet can't fly far, eh, Mark, ther Unknown? Give me half a chance ter try my weak wings, an' I'll show you a flight thet'll amaze yer!"

Side by side the two men went slowly up the trail nor spoke until they had turned a little elbow and were no longer in sight of Gideon.

"We must not be enemies," said Mark. "It seems that we want the blood of the same men. I have found two with the same weapon, and the third one waiting back there for doom, will soon follow. I know what you have suffered. I know why you have trailed Andros Ruby and his gang from New York to the Black Hills; but, sir, the man who suffered first should strike first."

Fred Ferret looked into Mark's face a full minute before he spoke.

"When you have completed your vengeance there will be nothing left for me," he said with a smile. "I cannot—I will not go back without revenge."

"You don't take it when you have an opportunity."

"When did I fail?"

"When you gave Major Blister your dagger between the shoulders at the Dolores."

Fred Ferret bit his lips vexatiously and his eyes fell beneath Mark's glance.

"I who suffered first should take vengeance first," Mark went on, repeating his words of a minute before.

"Not if I can get ahead of you!" exclaimed the Broadway Spotter. "We are on the same trail; our quarry is the same, and we have found it. Circumstances will not let us hunt together, so let each man strike when he can, you for the crime that made you swear eternal hatred against five men—I for that same crime, and for my torture in Mother Redbird's trap. Go back to your wounded hawk; but even if you find him, you can't carry out your oath to-night. You have lost your iron blade. It has fallen into Major Blister's hands again. Go back to your bird, Mark. Let me hunt wherever I find my prey."

Fred Ferret would have left the black-eyed avenger if he had not caught his wrist and drawn him close enough to show him a flash in his eyes.

"Don't make me turn on you," cried the Unknown. "I don't want to for Adele's sake. That girl adores you, Fred Ferret."

"Me?"

"Yes! I am her natural guardian and protector; her avenger, too. I tried to keep her back, but as well might I have tried to stem the tide of the ocean. If I fail she would step into my tracks and wield the iron blade I wield. She told you first about that dagger, she let you have it long enough to make one just like it save in the movable belt. You cannot be blind to the fact that Adele loves you. It is impossible. Don't interfere with my man-hunt, I say; don't for the girl's sake."

The Broadway Spotter waved the avenger away.

"I will strike when I can," he said. "From to-night it will be a race for two men—Andros Ruby and Wild Alaric."

Mark the Unknown dropped the wrist he held and started back.

"Remember that one part of my oath said that it should be death to the man who comes between me and my enemies," he said solemnly.

"Hang your oath!" growled the Spotter. "Go back to your winged hawk. I have an oath, too, and I carry my dagger while yours is in the hands of your worst foe. Ha, ha! we will see whose blade is crimsoned first."

Mark looked at the man who was laughing

coolly in the trail, and with a last look of warning turned away.

"I don't want him to interfere, for Adele's sake," he murmured. "That girl is the world to me, and I don't want to give her to him when I know he has taken life. I am the man who has the right to strike; I am the proper avenger of the crime that shocked Gotham over its breakfast service. Let him beware! I have warned him. He must not slay the two men who will be left when morning comes. They belong to me—to the iron dagger which, though now in Major Blister's hands, will yet find their hearts!"

He went back to the two rocks where he had left Gideon Goldbird, but the messenger-sport was gone.

Mark the Unknown started, and then burst into a light laugh.

"My crippled hawk is trying his wings, sure enough!" he exclaimed. "He was hardly worth rescuing the second time, for death had him by the throat when I brought him away from the noose. Where are you, Gideon Goldbird?"

Mark the Unknown fell to examining the vicinity of the two rocks, and for some minutes he searched the ground with great care.

This prisoner had fled, sure enough, and Fred Ferret's warning that the wounded hawk might try his wings had been realized.

"Let him go!" suddenly said Mark, abruptly giving up the hunt. "What's the use of hunting a man who has felt the point of the iron blade among the vitals. I have never failed yet. I thought him dead when I took the bowie from his body and carried it to Wild Alaric's door; but he managed to crawl back to camp and into Crimson Con's lair. It is good-by, Gideon Goldbird. I count you the third man for all. To-morrow the sun will find your stiffened corpse somewhere near by. Now for the last men."

The black-eyed man looked once more down the trail, and walked once more toward Camp Coyote.

He had given up the hunt for Gideon Goldbird, who at that moment was still alive and not half a mile away, but in the midst of darkness that seemed to take shape.

"This is what I call tryin' my wings with a vengeance!" he muttered. "I thought I war crawlin' into a clump of bushes when I war enterin' ther mouth ov a cave which ends heaven knows whar. I'm safe from that cool critter with ther iron blade, however. I doubt whether a bloodhound could find me hyer."

"Arter all it seems thet fortune has struck me at last. I will either die or rekyer hyer. An hour ago I wasn't partic'lar which turn would come, but now I want ter live. I swore ter ther old stage-driver ov Custer thet I would come back thar with a mustache like ther one I had when I went ter New York. I want ter do thet. I want ter show Major Blister thet ther pard who has served him East an' West will stan' no foolishness. Gideon Goldbird, you're in luck, but it's infernal slim. Whar does this dungeon end? It is darker hyar than it war in Mother Redbird's trap; but thank, Heaven! I'm not walled up alive."

After a short spell of rest amid the intense gloom, the messenger sport crawled on again deeper and deeper into the cavern which he had accidentally found.

All at once he drew back with a startling cry of horror.

Another foot an' I would hev pitched headlong into space!" he cried. "This is what I diskyer by feelin' my way. I must turn about—no more advance in thet direction. I don't fancy fallin' mebbe a hundred feet just now. Not for Gideon Goldbird if yer please."

"Say a thousand feet," said a voice, so near Gideon that he recoiled.

"Jehosaphat! I am not alone hyer. Who are you?"

The answer was a laugh that seemed to chill the sport's blood, and then a lucifer blazed in his face.

"I'll show you who I am, Gideon," continued the voice. "It cannot be that you have forgotten me. While we have never been intimate, you have seen me often."

Gideon's eyes were anxious to see the inmate of the underground den; he could not imagine who he could be.

"I know you, though you look like a ghost!" exclaimed the sport, staring into the face revealed by the match. "You ar' Si Slinkum, ther young clerk ov ther Dolores."

"I'm the shadow of that person," was the answer, and the speaker tried to smile. "Merciful heavens! Gideon, I know not where to go. I was saved from Major Blister's revolvers by Quartz Kid. I am a fugitive. I dare not go back East; I would not face Major Blister again for the world. I am half-starved. I could almost eat you, Gideon."

"You look like it," said Gideon. "But pluck up an' face fate like a man. Misfortune will make us friends. I want you ter look at my wound an' ter dress it. Let me git fixed up ag'in, Cyrus, an' we'll make things hum in certain quarters ov this mountain vineyard!"

Gideon's teeth cracked as he spoke.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE SUDDEN EXILE.

MAJOR BLISTER, as we know, did not hear of Gideon's second rescue by Mark the Unknown until after it had occurred. Then he was told by Quartz Kid, who heard the Sport of Two Cities curse the man with the iron dagger.

"I'll find Alaric anyhow, and by heavens! I'll know why he didn't shoot Mark dead in his boots!" growled the Major.

"Wal, hyer I am now—always on hand!" said some one near, and the Sport of Two Cities wheeled to face the man of whom he had spoken.

The mad eyes of Blister flashed; he took a hasty step toward his pard.

"You didn't kill him when you had a chance!" he cried.

"Wal, no," grinned Alaric. "Don't you want 'im for yerself, Major? What ar' yer holdin' ther iron blade for ef not for Mark ther Unknown?"

"By Jupiter! thet's a fact," was the response. "I'm glad you didn't shoot him, Alaric. He saved Gideon again?"

"Yes."

"This time he finished him."

"Certainly. Is that all, Major?"

Wild Alaric stepped back as he spoke.

"Whar are you going now?"

"Ter fill an engagement," was the reply.

"Out of camp?"

"Yes. Wait for me at ther shanty."

The tiger sport of Coyote gave the Major no more time for questions, but hurried away and Blister and Quartz Kid were alone.

"He's goin' ter fight ther Satan-orbed man!" said the boy. "I heard the engagement. They are ter meet at ther two rocks if yer know whar they are."

"I don't, but we could find them."

"Mebbe we'd better not hunt 'em up under ther present circumstances, Major. It is ther fight, not ours. Let 'em fight."

Major Blister looked after Wild Alaric with indecision. He fumed when he thought that the Broadway Spotter who had outwitted him at Terrapin Tom's was so close at hand. He felt like plunging forward and taking a hand in the duel to be fought by the two rocks.

"Didn't yer get ter see ther girl, Major?" asked Quartz Kid, breaking in upon his meditations so suddenly that he started.

"No, curse Burt Browne's manner of cooling a fellow down!" was the response.

"That's how she came ter come in between Alaric an' Fred Ferret. I see it all now. If you had seen her—"

"By the infernals! she'd have come between nothing!" interrupted the Major. "I've concluded ter let them fight. We'll go down to Terrapin's and sample his rot."

"Excuse me, Major," said the boy. "You'll hear Crimson Con and his pards curse Mark ther Unknown thar. It'll do yer soul good I know." And the boy spy of Custer was off and out of sight before he could be restrained.

Major Blister sent a growl after the nimble fellow and walked down to the liquor den of the camp where, as he expected, he found a crowd were paying forcible respects to the cool man who had taken Gideon Goldbird from the shadow of the noose.

"Hyer's ther Major!" cried several Coyoters when the Sport made his appearance at the door. "We lost 'im ag'in, Major! When we had Lariat Lige in ther noose he war taken out by a man with lightnin' eye an' steady hand."

"Lariat Lige?" echoed the Major reaching the counter. "Didn't he tell you that that man isn't your outlaw?"

"Yes."

"And you let him go on that?"

"We did, but for all that thar's still ther mole on his shoulder. Lariat had one thar."

"What if he had? We'll pass that by, gents. Gideon Goldbird is nothing to me now. A man who can't telegraph ther truth to his master, won't do."

The Major proceeded to invite the whole crowd up to the counter, an invitation which was quickly accepted, and twenty glasses fell back upon the whisky-sodden bar.

"Major, follow me," said Crimson Con in a whisper as the Sport of Two Cities turned away.

Blister gave the Coyoter a look that tried to penetrate the business he seemed to have on hand, and without a word followed him out.

"To my shanty, if yer please!" the leader of the Coyote pards said. "This is a matter which we want ter attend ter alone."

Major Blister did not speak again until he found himself in Crimson Con's cabin with the door shut behind him and the light of a little lamp in his face.

"Now, proceed. I am to be at Wild Alaric's cabin before long," he said when he found Crimson Con silent for a longer time than the circumstances seemed to demand.

"I've been puttin' this an' that together ever since you came hyer with Alaric," said Con, "an' if I'm not mistaken you have had another name besides Max Blister."

The Sport almost left his little stool.

"Don't get excited, Major, I'll go slow an' "

give yer breathin' time between sentences," grinned the Coyote. "Yes, you've had half a dozen names in your time, I guess. If thar war a mole on Gideon's shoulder, mebbe thar's a scar midway between yer left wrist an' elbow."

"What if thar is?" suddenly flashed the Major.

"It would prove ter this mountain seraph that you war at one time Captain Dandy ov ther 'Frisco Fleecers."

This time there was no start on the Major's part. He had evidently prepared himself for a thunderbolt, and he merely looked into the piercing eyes and dark face of Crimson Con.

"So that is your judgment, eh?" he said, after a minute's silence. "Ther next man I meet will probably call me Satan himself."

"I don't know who better deserves the name," smiled Crimson Con. "If thar ar' no scar on yer left arm, Major, ov course you ar' not Captain Dandy. Thet's ther test, but havin' made a study ov yer since you came hyer, I'm convinced. Wild Alaric war with yer then. If I am not mistaken on thet precious rosebud, he war then Faro Flip, ther card fakir. I'm hyer ter remind yer, Major, thet a few years don't spoil my memory. Roll up yer sleeve!"

For a moment there was no move on the Major's part to comply with Crimson Con's request, but at last he began to throw back his sleeve and lay bare his arm.

The nabob of Coyote leaned forward, with curiosity in his dark eyes, and watched the proceedings.

All at once he uttered a slight exclamation. "Thet proves it, eh, Major?" he said, catching Blister's eye as he looked up from the livid scar which had been brought into view by the lifting of the sleeve. "I don't often miss my man. If ther mole on Gideon's shoulder war a coincidence, this scar is not!"

For several minutes the Major held his arm in a position that enabled Crimson Con to eye the scar, and his eyes said plainly:

"Get enough of it, Con."

"Now, let me put in a question," said the Sport of Two Cities, suddenly dropping the sleeve. "Who are you?"

Crimson Con showed his teeth like a wolf well pleased.

"Don't yer know me?" he laughed. "Don't yer know ther galoot who broke yer bank ther night ther little girl an' Captain Dandy both left 'Frisco?"

"Jehosaphat! do we meet hyer?" ejaculated the Major.

"It seems so."

There was no audible reply, but under his breath the hunted Sport said:

"I've got to kill this man or add another enemy bitter as death to my list. This man is Silver Loup, the father of the girl Zoe, who is my Cleopatra in Custer. Ye gods! the last man I expected to find here. He will never let me get out to fight the iron blades, if I let him have his way."

Then he beat down the fierceness that was fast betraying him, and laughed as he replied to the man before him:

"We haven't met for—let me see—"

"Ten years," finished Crimson Con. "I'm a good hand at keepin' dates, Captain Dandy!"

The Sport of Two Cities saw that it was "Major Blister" no longer, for Crimson Con had gone back to the past as he knew it in 'Frisco.

"Whar's Nita?" he suddenly went on. "Captain Dandy, whar is the little girl you took from 'Frisco the night you fled. Do you think I have forgotten that night? I gave you ther scar you wear on yer arm. I wish my bowie had made its mark on yer heart. Come! no hoodwinkin' games hyer. My child! The boy is dead I hear."

Major Blister darted forward like a rattlesnake but without the warning given out by that serpent.

"I'll show you whar yer child is!" he hissed.

Crimson Con caught the movement in time to leap from the three-legged stool upon which he had seated himself, but the hands of the Major had already clutched him.

"I never suspected you, but I see you now," he cried. "It is strange that Alaric didn't find you out while he lived in Coyote. But never mind, Crimson Con, as they call you here. You've found Captain Dandy again but this time you will not make your mark on his person!"

It was now a fierce struggle by two men well matched for the mastery, and so full were their hands with the fight, they did not get to draw a single weapon. Tigerish eye looked hatred into eye that returned the look with interest, and although Crimson Con was forced toward the door by the fury of the Major's onslaught, he did not give up the contest.

The stools kicked away, rolled under the rough table, and the table itself toppled over and almost lost its balance.

Hand to hand and eye to eye the two toughs wrestled like gladiators in the small space between table and door. Each was anxious to get a chance to settle the contest with a weapon which was within easy reach; but they prevented one another for some minutes.

All at once Major Blister obtained a momentary advantage.

"I only wanted a second," he ejaculated. "This Coyote thug will find me quick as a cat!"

Crimson Con saw the dart of the hand that alighted on the dagger-hilt that protruded from an inner pocket on his enemy's person. He tried to prevent the drawing of the weapon, but the Major was too quick for him.

The next moment the blade caught the lamp-light, but there was no flash. It was the deadly blade of the iron dagger.

"Your child, Crimson Con, is yet my prize!" cried the Sport of Two Cities. "Having run me down at last, I pay you back for the scar on my arm which was intended for my heart."

Crimson Con had been forced against the door. He held it shut, a living barricade against any one outside, and when he saw the iron blade shoot upward in Major Blister's clutch, he made a wild effort to avoid the blow.

But it was a vain one!

The teeth of the Sport grated harshly as the knife came down; he drove it downward with all the strength he could summon to his right arm, and a cry which the coolest man on earth could not have kept back tore the Coyote's lips apart when the iron blade struck.

"Thar's scar for scar!" laughed the Major. "I'm ther last man you unmask, Crimson Con. Heavens! I did not expect to find you here. Nita? I'll make her queen of a greater place than Custer one of these days—when I've played the last card against Mark and the Broadway Spotter!"

The broad back of Crimson Con no longer held the door of the cabin shut. The leader of the Coyote pards lay at the Major's feet with the lamplight on his dark face.

The Major looked at him a moment and wiped the iron blade on the Coyote's sleeve. Then he stepped back and blew out the little lamp.

"This exiles Alaric and I from Coyote," he said in low tones. "We can't set our trap here for the iron blades. What a fool this man was to give me half a chance!"

Out he went shutting the door behind him.

"I must find Alaric now, then away from Coyote!" he said.

CHAPTER XXVI.

KEEPING OFF THE DOGS.

STANDING in the starlight was a certain person who saw the Sport of Two Cities emerge from Crimson Con's cabin and betake himself away with rapid strides.

This person was a young girl and she watched the Major with much curiosity.

"Something happened in that shanty awhile ago," she said in low tones to herself. "Two men came this way awhile ago and one was the leader of the Coyote pards who calls himself Crimson Con. They walked together arm in arm and entered the hut. Now one comes out and hurries away; it is Major Max Blister. The light is out too. It was burning within the cabin a few minutes ago."

Adele—for the speaker was she—did not follow the Major, but watched the cabin for the reappearance of the man who must still be on the inside.

Nobody came out to reward her watchfulness, however, and the silence that continued to enshroud Crimson Con's abode increased her belief that "something" had happened beyond the threshold.

By degrees the girl approached the cabin, and at last found herself at the door, where she listened with much attention. Not a sound came from the interior; the silence of death seemed to reign in the darkness beyond.

At last Adele lifted the latch, and pushed the door ajar. She stood on the threshold and listened again, but still no sound. If Crimson Con was awake, why did he not demand to know her errand to his quarters?

Emboldened by the very stillness of the place, Adele went in. She felt the table, and then the little lamp left thereon by the Major. Beside it lay a few lucifers, one of which seemed to cling to the girl's fingers. It could not be possible that Crimson Con had left the cabin without being seen by her.

Adele struck a light, and lowered the lamp for an inspection of the floor.

"My God!" rung suddenly from her throat. "I was right. Something did happen here!"

At her feet lay the body of a stalwart and very handsome man, and a shudder ran over the girl's frame when she held the lamp close to his face and saw that he was dead.

"This is your work, Andros Ruby," she said, as if the murderer stood before her to be accused. "This gives you more enemies than you have ever had. Coyote will be at your back now if they put the crime on your shoulders, and they may keep the iron blade from carrying out its owner's oath of vengeance. I hope you have fled the camp, Andros. I trust you will baffle these men. You must perish by one of the iron daggers. Even though you have taken the life of Crimson Con, you must not die at the hands of his pards. If I can I will put them on the wrong trail, but only to save you for the iron dagger."

Adele put the lamp back, and saw the shadow of the table fall athwart the dead face of the Coyote rough. The one blow delivered by the iron dagger, in the mad hands of Major Blister, had ended the fight for the mastery between him and Crimson Con. The girl had seen that one stroke had finished the struggle, evidences of which were apparent in the overturned stools and other articles of furniture.

She could imagine the fight that had taken place between the two desperadoes, but she did not know that it had been preceded by the exposure of a certain scar which proclaimed the Major somebody besides Andros Ruby the New York Sport and criminal.

"I must put the men of Coyote on the wrong trail," she said. "I want Andros Ruby to fall by the iron dagger—not by the revolvers of Crimson Con's pards. How can I do it?"

For some time the girl stood at the table racking her brains with half a dozen plans that suggested themselves, but none seemed possible.

"They may know that the two men came here together," she said, "and suspicion will naturally fall upon the Major. All Coyote will spring to his trail. I know these mountain men. I have seen them in Custer. The longer they wait for Crimson Con the more certain will be the Major's escape. I can do nothing more than put off the hour of discovery. I must keep the pards of Coyote from this cabin and its dead man."

She went out, and after standing for several moments in the starlight before the cabin, she moved toward Terrapin Tom's, where she hoped to find the pards of the mountain camp.

"Let me hold them but one hour," she said to herself. "The Major will join Wild Alaric, and the two exiles will fly."

She presented herself at the door of the saloon, and was seen by half a dozen men at once.

"Thar's ther angel what came ter camp with Lariat Lige!" was the exclamation that greeted Adele. "She is Burt Browne's guest now, but ther rose ov Coyote all ther same."

Several men sprung forward to escort the girl into the liquor trap, but she waved them back, while she smiled and entered of her own accord.

She counted the pards with her eyes, and seemed to be satisfied. They were all there, all but the man lying dead in the little shanty down the street.

Burt Browne gave Adele a protective look as she advanced, and he took a step toward her, when she halted before the crowd.

"Can't yer give us a song, my nightingale?" asked a bronze giant. "We don't hear angel voices often in Coyote, an' I fancy that ther sound ov 'em is about forgotten hyer."

What could be more to Adele's present purpose than a song? Her beauty seemed to assure the Coyote toughs that she possessed a good voice, and forthwith a song was demanded from all sides.

It was a strange place for a concert, and the time was stranger still; but Adele had sought the den to hold the pards from Major Blister's trail. If she could only do that, she would be more than satisfied.

Moving to the center of the room, to which a box had been carried for her accommodation, Adele halted and faced the rough audience. The pards took off their hats and became silent.

For a minute the girl appeared to be making a mental selection of some song, when she suddenly began in a voice that was wonderfully sweet and full of music. The wild men of the mountain camp listened like persons entranced. Not a limb moved; the whole crowd stood like statues before the girl, and heard the first song through without the slightest interruption.

"I control these men," Adele murmured. "I could hold them here till morning. Major Blister, you may thank me for keeping thirty tigers from your trail."

The first song was followed by ten minutes of congratulations, and rest for the girl. She noticed that no one retired, and the crowd was made no larger by additions.

Another song was received with the same respect and satisfaction. Adele had the men of Coyote at her command, and as song followed song, their admiration and attention increased.

"Go an' fetch ther captain hyer," suddenly exclaimed one of the band. "He doesn't know what he is missin', an' then—"

"Let him be," said Burt Browne. "It is his own fault if he misses a treat like this."

Adele's eyes thanked her Coyote friend for the word that checked what might have proved a dangerous movement, and all thoughts of Crimson Con were drowned by another song.

Adele sang two hours away on the improvised stage at Terrapin Tom's. She had given the slayer of Crimson Con that much time the start of the men who would send heavenward a cry for his blood, the moment they discovered the dead man on the cal in floor. Was it possible to hold them another hour?

She had given them the songs calculated to please them, and now she began on the national airs. The effect of the first notes was enough.

"I can hold them!" she mentally exclaimed. "One more hour of grace, Andros Ruby!"

In the midst of the "Star Spangled Banner," which Adele sung magnificently, some one came

to the door. She saw him the moment he appeared, and the next moment their eyes met.

"Hyer's a concert, by Jupiter! an' Adele is ther star ov ther evening!" ejaculated the astonished new-comer, who was Quartz Kid, the boy spy of Custer. "My comin' has disconcerted her, somewhat. I wonder if she knows what I know. Ther pards ov Coyote can't hev heard ov it, or they wouldn't stan' thar an' listen ter thet girl as they do."

The girl sung the national air to the close. She dared not look at the boy in the door, for his eyes seemed to beam with a look she did not like. She knew that he was the Major's spy, and that more than once he had watched her movements, only to report them to the man he served.

"Why don't you pards hunt ther galoot who left yer captain in his shanty?" suddenly exclaimed the boy, coming into the den and addressing the crowd.

Adele started and gave the boy an angry look. "What's thet, boy?" said a dozen voices.

The girl attempted to catch Quartz Kid's eye and suppress his reply; but she failed.

"Don't yer know? Go down an' look at ther dead man lyin' in Crimson Con's cabin—lyin' thar with a bowie wound over his heart."

A wild cry, a dozen oaths cut the close air of the whisky den.

"Crimson dead?" was the cry.

"Dea! I should gently remark," replied Quartz Kid. "Jehul hyer ye've been listenin' heaven knows how long ter a girl's songs, while ther man who cut Crimson Con, is makin' tracks for somewhar."

There was a rush for the door, and the men of Coyote almost tumbled over one another in their eagerness to be first at the cabin where their leader was a corpse.

"Thet broke up ther concert, eh?" laughed Quartz Kid, as he halted before Adele, whose face was quite pale. "I didn't know they war entirely ignorant ov ther affair down thar. Sorry ter break up ther show, miss, but hang me ef I could help it."

"You may wish you had kept your lips sealed," said Adele, in a low voice, when she had reached the door with Quartz Kid.

"How so?"

He looked up into her face astonished.

"You are Major Blister's friend; you are in his employ; you are his spy?"

"Wal, what ov that?"

"You don't want him to have all these Coyote roughs at his heels, do you?"

"Jerusalem! no!" exclaimed the boy.

"Well, you've set them there," said Adele, calmly.

"I—how?"

"By telling them that Crimson Con lies murdered in his cabin. They know that he went there with Major Blister, and since the Major is not in camp they will know that he killed their captain."

"But Mark the Unknown may have done it," said the boy. "There is in Crimson Con's bosom a wound like that ther iron dagger makes."

"It made it, for it is in Major Blister's possession. Mark the Unknown would not strike Crimson Con; he has nothing against him. What have you done, eh? You have given your master but two hours' start of thirty men who will swear to have his life. I have been singing for him here."

"You?"

"Yes. If you had not come, Quartz Kid, I would have kept these men heretill morning."

"I don't see why you want to save Max Blister," was the response. "I have seen you with Mark the Unknown, and with Fred Ferret, the Broadway Spotter, and they hate him like snake."

"Never mind," smiled Adele. "I have been holding the bloodhounds back. Hark!"

At that moment a dozen voices came from where the hut of the dead Coyote stood.

"They have found him," whispered the boy spy, while he listened. "Mebbe, though, they won't accuse the Major—"

"Oh! we'll find him if we have ter rake ther West!" interrupted a loud voice. "With ther men ov Coyote on his track, Major Blister will wish he had never been born."

"That settles it!" said Quartz Kid.

For several minutes Adele and the boy listened to the curses of the men who had found the corpse in the cabin, and they were about to separate when a figure passed between them and the saloon. They saw it for a second in the light that emanated from the lamp above the door.

"Thar's yer friend," said Quartz Kid clutching the girl's arm. "Mark the Unknown has not gone away. I can turn ther Coyoters against him an' save the Major. I'll go down ter Crimson Con's an' set ther gang on him."

"If you dare!" hissed Adele bending over the boy till her lips seemed to touch his face. "If you play a hand like that, I will not only prove that Max Blister killed Crimson Con, but while the Coyoters are mad as tigers I will tell them that you are his spy, and pard! Beware!"

The boy spy stared into the flashing eyes above him, and stood still.

CHAPTER XXVII.

BY CONE LIGHT.

In his flight from Coyote with his hands red with the blood of Crimson Con, Major Blister came suddenly upon a man who halted him with a hand that dropped heavily upon his shoulder.

"Shoot me for a salmon if you don't move as if thar's a rattler at your heels!" said Wild Alaric before the fugitive sport had fully recognized him.

"Thar'll be thirty ov 'em thar if I stay in this camp awhile longer," was the reply. "I've exiled both ov us ter-night, Alaric, but I had to do it."

"What has happened?"

"I've killed Crimson Con."

Wild Alaric let slip an exclamation of incredulity.

"It's a fact, a cold-red fact at that," the Major went on showing by his very soberness that he was telling the terrible truth.

"Wal, if ye've done that we ar' exiled, sure enough," said Alaric through set teeth. "But what made yer do it?"

"It war kill him or be killed. That man knew Captain Dandy and his 'Frisco faro pard.' 'In mercy's name who was he then?'"

"Zoe's father."

Wild Alaric said nothing for a while, but looked toward the cabin where at that moment the Major's victim lay.

"Come! you don't want to go back thar," Max Blister went on catching Wild Alaric suddenly as if he noticed in his eyes a desire to go to the dead rough. "He's dead enough. I made sure of that before I left him. We are exiles now, and the traps we make for the iron blades cannot be set in Coyote. What have you done? Ther boy said you went to fight a duel with Fred Ferret at the two rocks wherever they are."

"He did not come to time. At ther supreme moment ther Broadway Spotter played coward!" flashed Alaric. "Never mind! ther time will come when I will force him ter fight it out. Exile is it, Major?"

"Exile it is!"

"I accept ov it," grinned Alaric. "I don't think ther death ov Crimson Con at this time is for ther best; but we've got ter put up with it. I've been exiled before. It's nothin' ter Wild Alaric. Off we ar', Major."

Together the two men turned their backs on the cabins of Coyote, and went toward the mountains in the starlight.

"Heads an' tails for destination," Alaric said, halting and taking a silver dollar from his pocket. "Heads, we go back ter Custer; tails, elsewhar."

He gave the piece a toss and sent it spinning toward the stars, watched by himself and his companion. Down came the dollar with a ring as it struck a stone and spun away, falling at last on a bit of earth.

"Heads!" exclaimed Alaric.

"I don't like thet!" exclaimed the Major. "You know what Si Slinkum d'd ere he left Custer. Captain Cressy and his Vigilantes know that I am Andros Ruby, wanted in New York, and in half a dozen other places. Not to Custer, Alaric."

"Very well. We'll toss 'er up ag'in," was the response, and once more the dollar was thrown into the air, and fell back this time to pronounce a verdict more in accordance with Major Blister's wishes.

The two men had stopped long enough in a certain quarter of Coyote to possess themselves of the horses which had carried them from Custer City, and as Alaric climbed back into the saddle after having thrown the dollar, he looked into the Major's face and showed his teeth in a grin.

"Our plan is ter baffle ther pards ov Coyote, but yet to set a trap for Mark the Unknown an' Fred Ferret. You hev ther iron blade yet, Max?"

The Sport of Two Cities clapped his hand to his side and then gave vent to an exclamation of disappointment.

"By heavens! it is gone!" he cried. "I had it when I left Crimson Con's shanty. It is lost now."

"Once more out of our hands!" laughed Alaric.

As for Blister, he frowned, grated his teeth, and sent a wishful look toward the camp.

"Mebbe we'll see it ag'in before long," his companion continued, in the same devil-may-care vein. "It is not lost for good, Major."

"Not if Mark finds it," was the reply. "It is very apt to come home in a manner we won't relish. Curse my luck! I've lost the very thing I wanted to keep. I'd give a thousand dollars for that iron blade just now."

"Ten thousand wouldn't restore it," said Alaric. "Remember ther corpse of Zoe's father is liable ter be discovered at any moment. I am off."

Still thinking of the lost dagger, Major Blister was compelled to follow his friend, and the two men hastened to put some miles between them.

They were indeed exiles, but it was not their intention to quit the country. Behind them were the friends of Crimson Con, but there too were two other men who were more in their thoughts.

They doubted not that Gideon Goldbird had met his death at the hands of Mark the Unknown, and the Major did not dream that Cyrus Slinkum the clerk of the Dolores was still among the mountains.

"They won't know whar ter find us; they may not follow us," said Wild Alaric when the two pards exiled from Coyote sat on their horses in the first gleams of another day. "Quartz Kid knows nothin' ov this flight. He cannot put ther iron blades on our trail. I am itchin' ter spring a trap on both ov those men. Hang me if I don't go back an' put 'em on ther right scent."

"And leave me here?"

"Yes. I know this country like a book, Major. Thar's a cave nigh hyer whar a man might hide a year an' never be found by the keenest pointer thet ever struck a human trail. I'm anxious ter get rid ov those men. Hang this thing ov bein' hunted by men who play separate hands, but who handle the same weapon—an iron blade thet has already tasted ther blood ov our pards! Trust me ter set them on ther trail ter a trap."

"But you'll finish 'em an' not give me a chance at either one," said the Major.

"I'll bring 'em inter ther trap!" was the answer. "Let me show yer ther cavern, Major. I'll come back ahead ov 'em."

The Sport of Two Cities consented, and again they were riding back toward Coyote. The back trail was not followed far, for Alaric turned suddenly into a mountain bridle-path and the two pards rode deep into the mountains for some distance.

When a halt was finally made Wild Alaric pointed to a lot of bushes that seemed to form an impenetrable clump.

"In thar's yer camp till I come back, Major," he said. "Crawl through those bushes a little ways and you'll find yerself in a cave, which I believe takes up ther hull inside ov thet mountain. I'll jine yer ter-morrow, an' I promise yer now, Major, thet I'll have one if not two men on my track. Trust old Alaric ter play a hand thet'll give you Zoe at last, an' thet'll rid us an' ther world forever ov ther two iron blades."

Major Blister dismounted and Alaric leaning forward, took his horse's rein.

"Thar's a natural stable not far from hyer an' a hoss cannot be found thar," he said, in response to the Major's look. "Push right inter ther bushes thar. Ye've got matches. Ther floor ov ther cave is strewn with pine cones. I'll find yer to-morrow with a report thet will make yer heart thump."

In another moment the Sport of Two Cities was standing alone and Alaric was riding slowly away.

"I wish I could assume the offensive now," growled the Major, before he turned to enter the cave which as he had been assured was at his back. "I have lost the iron blade whose tilt turns, but it may never find Mark's hands. If by luck he does pick it up, he will try to restore it like he gave it to Gideon, Poker Perry and Night-Owl Oil. But the queerest incident of the whole game is that I should meet Zoe's father in Coyote. The girl has no idea where he is, and I never thought that he would know the man who ten years ago as Captain Dandy of the 'Frisco Fleecers played a game that made him wince. Since then I've been Andros Ruby, and a dozen other men in New York and elsewhere. There is no man west of the Missouri who has played so many games, and won so many desperate stakes as he who now calls himself Max Blister. With two desperate and cool men after us, each armed with an iron dagger, Alaric and I have led an exciting life for some time past, but we are near the end of the play now. My last pard will fetch them into the mountain snare, where the game begun in New York four years ago will be played through. I will inspect my new quarters now, and wait for Wild Alaric's signal which he has promised shall not be delayed longer than to-morrow."

Major Blister plunged into the bushes, and made his way through them for some distance when he came suddenly in contact with the mountain-side. The next moment he saw himself in front of an opening which seemed to be the mouth of a cavern, and he was soon moving along a dark corridor whose side and ceiling he could touch with his hands.

He kept his way until the corridor widened abruptly into a chamber of large dimensions, and recollecting Alaric's remark about the pine burrs he stooped and ran his hand over the floor. It almost immediately came in contact with a dry cone, and a moment later a match in the Major's hand set it on fire.

"This place could hold a regiment of Uncle Sam's blues!" exclaimed the exiled Sport when he began to see the dimensions of the room he had entered. "W'at a trap it would make for Fred Ferret and Mark! If Alaric will fetch them here, we'll make it a better prison than Mother Redbird's dungeon."

The cone burned until its light revealed the gray walls of the cavern and the Major ignited a pile of cones with it. As they blazed up he threw himself on the ground and for awhile

watched the shadows of the flames on the ceiling above.

If he had looked behind him at a certain moment he would have seen two pair of eyes that glowed like the orbs of a brace of panthers.

Among the shadows thrown by the flames that danced grotesquely in the middle of the chamber stood two men and in their hands were held two large six-shooters.

"That man is to be my evil genius while I live," whispered the youngest one of the twain, a youth who had barely attained his majority.

"I thought I was shut of him forever when Quartz Kid saved me from his trigger. Now let me settle with him, Gideon. By heavens! Andros Ruby shall never menace me again with the shadow of the law."

"You will do nothing ov ther kind," was the answer, and five bronze fingers encircled the youth's wrist. "Thet man I hev served through thick an' thin, but he cursed me when I came back from New York. I have sworn ter pay Major Blister back, but I want ter know first what brought him hyer."

"After that, what?"

"I make no promises," said Gideon, glancing into the face of his companion, who was Si Slinkum, the hotel clerk.

"Well, I will!" was the answer. "Before he touches me again, I promise to send him over the death-trail with a bullet in his head. You can chase a wolf till he turns on you, Gideon Goldbird!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

FOUND!

CAMP COYOTE seemed to rock under the wild excitement that succeeded the finding of the corpse in Crimson Con's cabin. The men who acknowledged him as their leader filled the air with threats of vengeance, and Major Blister was the person against whom the threats were hurled.

A search of the camp revealed the fact that the Sport of Two Cities had departed, and with him had gone Wild Alaric, who might have had a hand in the killing in the cabin.

Quartz Kid too soon forgot the threat of the girl Adele. The boy, thoroughly enlisted in the Major's service, was anxious to throw the pards of Coyote on the wrong scent. If he could turn them against Mark the Unknown who was still in Camp, he would be doing Max Blister an invaluable favor, and besides sustain the reputation he had already acquired for being an example of youthful shrewdness.

"She threatens ter turn on me, eh?" he ejaculated with a sneer, when he found himself out of Adele's reach. "If I can't match thet girl, I'll go back ter Custer an' live on sunshine. Let me show her a trick or two!"

At that moment the Coyoters were holding an indignation meeting at Terrapin Tom's, and under the influence of some of that gentleman's liquid poison, the excitement had reached a very high pitch.

In the midst of it a piece of wood was thrown into the crowd by some one on the outside, and a bit of paper was found attached to it.

Of course this incident, coming when it did, drew the attention of all to the paper, and when it had been detached from the wood and unfolded, Burt Browne read as follows to the crowd:

"MEN OF COYOTE:—"

"You are on the wrong lay when you accuse the man called Blister of killing Crimson Con. If you will noose the person who took Lariat Lige, or Gideon Goldbird, from your noose, you will find the right person. Con was killed with an iron dagger that belongs to Mark, the Unknown. He is somewhere in Coyote, and if not caught and promptly dealt with, his dagger will do some more red work. He has friends here who will attempt to shield him, if they get a chance. ONE WHO KNOWS."

A silence of several minutes followed the reading of this mysterious paper. Here was a new trail, and one which seemed to surprise and disconcert the pards of the mountain camp. Nobody said anything against the Major now, and when the Coyoters found their tongues again, they heaped curses in profusion upon the head of Mark, the Unknown.

The person who had thrown the paper into the den stood outside and smiled to himself over the results of his work.

"I'll let them digest that," he said to himself. "I can see already that I've put them on a new trail, and before morning this man who handles the iron blade with such recklessness will find himself in a trap whose jaws won't relax. Ha, ha! Mark. You've got Quartz Kid ag'in' you now."

The speaker was the boy spy of Custer, and regardless of Adele's threat and look, he had disobeyed her commands.

It was evident that the boy's scheme had produced a sudden change.

There was no evidence that Major Blister had taken Crimson Con's life. He had gone with the Coyoter to the cabin, and had quitted it alone, when nobody knew. The darkest circumstance against him was his sudden departure from camp.

"You had to go ahead and show your teeth!"

said a voice, so near Quartz Kid that he turned as if a rattlesnake had hissed behind him.

Adele stood before him, Adele with mad eyes and clinched hands.

"What have I done?" cried the boy.

"Just what I warned you against doing," was the reply. "You have tried to throw the men of this camp upon Mark's trail. I told you not to do this, but you would not listen."

For a moment Quartz Kid looked up into Adele's face and showed his teeth. He was very defiant, for she was but a girl, while he was her superior in strength, and inclined to stubbornness.

"What if I go ahead an' prove this to the satisfaction of the Coyoters?" he exclaimed. "You can't convince them that the Major killed Crimson Con. I know that you are the ally of this man who calls himself Mark the Unknown. I saw enough in Custer to convince me that you sometimes direct the blade he uses."

"In Custer, where you let Max Blister make you his spy!" said the girl.

"Perhaps."

"If you knew that man you would turn from him."

"And take up with Mark, eh?"

"No. Mark the Unknown is able to take care of himself."

"Then, let him fight the men in Terrapin Tom's!" cried Quartz Kid. "He will have to do that from now on."

The girl glanced toward the open door of the whisky-den, and saw the men of Coyote form a group, with hands solemnly lifted.

"They are going to take an oath of some kind!" she exclaimed, starting forward. "Woe to you, my boy, if it be against Mark."

Quartz Kid followed the girl to within a few yards of the saloon, where she stopped and leaned eagerly forward.

"Swear! every mother's son ov yer!" cried a tall man who had mounted the impromptu stage from which Adele had given her concert. "Swear ter hunt this man called Mark to ther death, for ther killin' ov Crimson Con! Swear ter begin in Coyote ter-night! Woe ter him if he falls inter ther hands ov ther avengers ov blood!"

The response that followed seemed to shake the rafters of the den, and Quartz Kid turned to the girl, who had not missed a syllable.

"This is your work!" she said, wheeling upon him before he could get beyond her hand. "I warned you that you had better not interfere in this man-hunt by the pards of Coyote. You are bound that my friend shall be turned from his sworn work by a lot of vengeance-hunters. Now, see what I will do. Come with me, Quartz Kid, spy and pard of Major Blister. If you attempt to leave me, I will kill you in your boots!"

Adele had drawn a revolver, which gleamed in the boy's face while she spoke, and with the hand that clutched his arm she hurried him toward the thrilling scene being enacted at Terrapin Tom's.

The light that filled her eyes warned Quartz Kid that an attempt to break from her grasp might be attended by fatal consequences.

"I'll have ter face ther music an' see ther thing through," he said to himself, while he was being conducted toward the saloon. "Mebbe I have acted with haste in this matter, but I had ter do suthin' ter keep ther Coyoters from followin' ther Major."

By this time Adele was at the open door; the lights and the men of Coyote were before her; the oath against Mark the Unknown had just been finished.

All at once the girl stepped across the threshold and was seen at once.

"I'm sorry, but you can't resume the concert, Nightingale," sung out a stalwart fellow. "We've got serious business on hand—"

"I know that," said Adele. "I am here to take a hand in it. I have just heard you swear against a man whose hands are not stained with your captain's blood. The message that came to you a while ago is a lie, calculated and written to turn you from the man who did the deed."

"What do you know?" demanded half a dozen men.

"I saw Major Blister come forth from Crimson Con's cabin. I went in after him, and the Captain of Coyote was dead on the floor, but still warm."

A wild cry was the response, and Adele saw the excited crowd surge toward her.

"An' you afterward came hyer an' sung for us?" they cried.

"Yes."

"Why didn't you tell us at once? If Major Blister killed Crimson Con, you kept ther crime—ther secret—ter yer yerself, an' gave him three hours' grace."

Quartz Kid broke suddenly from Adele's side, and reached the Coyoters before she could detain him.

"Thet girl is ther pard ov ther man who killed ther captain!" he cried, covering Adele with his outstretched hand. "She stood up hyer an' sung while Mark war wipin' his knife an' gettin' away. Ther iron dagger is ag'in at work. It has come ter Coyote ter kill whenever

it finds a victim. Men ov Coyote, you can believe Quartz Kid, or ther girl pard ov ther man who kills in ther dark!"

A flash came to the dark eyes of the girl, whose stature seemed to increase an inch while she heard the boy.

"Is this true, Adele?" said Burt Browne, coming forward. "Are you the pard of the man who gave Crimson Con the iron dagger in his own cabin?"

"I am that man's friend. I came here because our enemies are here. The boy who has accused me is the spy of the man of whom I have told you much, Burt Browne. I have shielded him. I plead guilty to singing here for the purpose of keeping you men from Major Blister's trail, because I want the iron dagger to find him in the end. I pity the boy who can stand here and throw the crime of murder upon one who never hated the dead man. He knows that Mark is innocent, and I could turn him against the man he serves with one whispered sentence."

"Never!" exclaimed Quartz Kid. "Take yer choice between that tigress from Custer an' me. She stands thar ther confessed friend an' pard ov Mark. She—"

"Silence!" thundered Burt Browne, and he turned upon the boy with a face darkened by rage. "If you ar' ther spy ov Captain Blister, that is enough for Burt Browne. Your oath wouldn't weigh ag'in' that gir's laugh. If she says that Mark ther Unknown didn't kill ther captain, that's enough for me. Major Blister's pard, eh? In my judgment that's enough ter exile yer from Coyote."

Quartz Kid recoiled without effort from the dark eyes of the man who came down upon him like a storm with the last sentence on his lips.

"I've failed," he muttered. "They believe ther girl, an' I'm a liar in their eyes. Never mind; give me half a chance, an' I'll get even with Adele ther schemer."

He moved toward the door with his face to the crowd, but he had not taken three steps when the hand of Burt Browne closed on his arm.

"I hate a liar! I could throw you through ther house!" he exclaimed.

"Let him go," said Adele, suddenly reaching Burt's side. "He had to do something to save his master."

The boy spy fell instantly from the hands of the big Coyoter, and the next moment he was beyond the threshold, with the laugh of the thirty pards in his ears.

"So you sung ter give him a start?" said Burt Browne, turning upon the girl.

"I did."

"You want him ter escape from us, ter feel ther point ov ther iron blade ov Mark ther Unknown?"

"I do. I am the person to be punished for shielding the man who killed Crimson Con."

She stood before the dark-faced and tigerish crowd with a smile at the corners of her finely chiseled mouth. "When you hunt the murderer, remember that another enemy is on his track. The letter that came to you wrapped about a piece of wood was the boy's play. I am Adele, the friend of two men who want the life of the last of the Gotham gang. Followed from New York and tracked at last to Custer and Coyote, three have fallen—the last one to-night by the hands that took him from your noose. Here I am, men of Coyote. I could have put you at once on the track of your captain's slayer, but I did not. I helped Major Blister away. I am the guilty accomplice!"

The men who leaned forward with mad eyes and dark scowls drew back. They wanted the life of the man who had taken Crimson Con's. If Adele had been a man they would have torn her to pieces.

"Let it be a race between Coyote an' this man Mark!" suddenly cried Burt Browne. "If he kin git thar first he may wield his iron blade, but by ther eternal heavens! he must not balk Coyote too coolly. We unswear the oath taken ag'in' him awhile ago. We swear it ag'in' Major Blister! Before ther hour ends he will have Coyote at his heels. Wild Alaric is with him—two wolves exiled forever from this camp by ther blow that killed Crimson Con!"

The men sent up a responsive shout that almost deafened the girl who heard it roll along the smoky rafters of the whisky-den.

"Go back ter my cabin," continued Burt Browne leading her to the door. "Make that mountain palace yer home while you stay in Coyote. Before day we'll find ther trail ov this Sport who gave Con ther dagger."

He dismissed her at the door, and turned back to his companions. Adele stood in the light like a person in a dilemma.

"I have but one enemy in Coyote now and that one is the boy baffled to-night," she murmured when she started off. "While I would not harm him, even though he is Major Blister's friend, he must not try to play another hand like the one he tried awhile ago."

The girl walked toward Burt Browne's cabin and when about to enter it she turned at the sound of a footstep.

"You play hands that surprise me," said the handsome man who appeared at her side. "If it had not been for your concert, Andros

Ruby would not have escaped for me. Look here, Adele. The iron blade is mine again!"

"Where did you get it?"

"Andros Ruby dropped it in his flight from Coyote."

CHAPTER XXIX.

ENTRAPPED IN COYOTE.

WE must not forget the man who left Major Blister at the mouth of the mountain cavern to set his face toward Camp Coyote with the avowed purpose of decoying two men into a trap which should be the end of the game played by the iron daggers.

Wild Alaric had grown impatient; he was eager to go back to the life he led when the avengers found him as the Major's right bower, but this he could not do until the question of mastery had been settled.

Alaric had no definite plan in view until he found himself once more near Coyote. He was afraid that neither Mark nor Fred Ferret, the young Broadway Spotter would find the trail of the camp fugitives without being helped. He had come back to help them.

Night came down upon the camp once more, and found the place but half-populated. The oath of revenge taken at Terrapin Tom's had taken the majority of Crimson Con's pards from camp. They had started to find the Major against whom their whole hatred was directed.

Those who knew Alaric best would hardly have recognized him when he entered Coyote, keeping among the shadows of the cabins. Somewhere along the trail the sport had perfected a transformation that completely altered his appearance, and left no resemblance to Major Blister's pard. The very appearance of his horse had been changed, and the man who entered Coyote in the brilliant starlight looked like some mountain tourist with his clean face and wild black eyes.

Yet, for all this it was Wild Alaric.

Coyote seemed to have taken a rest, for Terrapin Tom's looked like the most quiet place on earth, and when Alaric rode by nobody rushed to the door and in boisterous tones invited him in to take "suthin'."

Alaric rode through camp without incident, and in the shadowed suburbs he tethered his horse and walked back.

Half-way up-street and near Terrapin Tom's, he caught sight of a boy as he came from a certain cabin and stopped before the door.

"Thar's ther very chap I've been lookin' for!" ejaculated the Major's pard, and before the boy could get away he was at his side.

"Jehu, stranger!" exclaimed Quartz Kid, looking up into the face he did not recognize. "Ain't yer kinder afraid ter drop down in this serpents' den?"

"I don't know," laughed Alaric. "What kind ov place have I reached, anyhow?"

"Thet's owin' ter how they take yer comin'."

"They?"

"Burt Browne an' pards. Burt has succeeded ter ther kingship since Crimson Con got his quietus. They don't take kindly ter visitors hyer."

"What! don't yer recognize me, Quartz?" suddenly whispered Alaric, stooping over the boy.

"You ain't ther Major, eh?"

"No—Alaric."

"Back in ther fire!" exclaimed the boy. "In heaven's name what's become ov Blister?"

"He's safe in ther mountains."

"With thirty men itchin' ter blow his head from his shoulders! what made him do that, Alaric? Did he hev ter kill Con?"

"I guess thet war the case," said the Major's pard.

"If he wasn't cornered an' didn't hev ter do it, he war a fool," was the boy's quick response. "Why didn't he stay hyer an' fight ther iron blades?"

"With Con dead behind him he had to go," said Alaric grinding his teeth. "I would have stayed an' fought it out."

"He lost ther knife."

"Ther iron one? Yes."

"Wal, it's been found."

"By whom?"

"By Mark."

"Is he hyer now?"

"Not just now, but he will meet Adele at Burt Browne's at nine o'clock to-night."

"Is it eight now?"

"About that time."

Wild Alaric touched the boy's arm and looked down into his face.

"I've come back ter bait ther trap," he said, "ther trap that is ter catch one if not two men. Does Adele or Mark know your handwritin', boy?"

"Yes. Ther girl saw ther note I tied to ther stick an' flung among the Coyote pards ter throw them onto ther wrong trail," said the boy biting his lips.

"Then I've got to do it myself. I am goin' ter bait ther trap with a piece ov paper—a decoy in black an' white. We'll go ter my old shanty, Quartz, an' fix it up."

Wondering what kind of scheme the Sport had planned, Quartz Kid accompanied Wild Alaric to his cabin where in the light of the

lamp which the boy shaded with his body the big Sport wrote a letter which ran as follows:

"Thar is a dead man at Crimson Con's shanty, Alaric, old boy. I am forced to go into exile from Coyote; when you come back you will find this under my door and I will be off for the cave near the lost river. You can not miss the trail to it, but for fear you might I leave with this letter a map which will surely let you to me. In the cave we will set a trap for Mark the Unknown and for Fred Ferret the New York Spotter. Keep your eyes open, Alaric; we will see the end of this game in spite of the iron dagger and its master."

"MAJOR MAX."

The boy who looked over Alaric's shoulder while he wrote out the sentences in a coarse and legible hand wondered what was to be done with this singular document. Alaric pushed it to one side when it was finished, and drew a rough but striking diagram which had one trail so plainly marked that Quartz Kid declared he could follow it without a guide.

"These decoys an' ter be dropped before Burt Browne's cabin," said the Sport folding the map within the letter. "You say that Mark the Unknown is ter meet Adele thar at nine?"

"Yes. I haven't been idle since ther killin'," smiled the boy. "Shall I salt ther trail, Alaric?"

"If yer please, Quartz," said the sport and the papers were placed in the boy's hands. "Be careful! It must be played so as ter appear thet the papers war found at my door an' lost ag'in."

"I understand that. Give me a chance ter best this dagger king, Alaric, an' you'll hev my everlastin' gratitude."

"I will wait for you hyer, lights out an' silence in ther old shanty."

Eager to be off, the boy clutched the decoys and broke for the door, while Alaric drew the little lamp across the table and blew it out.

"Trust me ter set a trap!" he laughed to himself. "Why I've set 'em everywhar in city an' mountain an' not once did they fail ter catch ther tiger."

Meanwhile, Quartz Kid had stolen toward Burt Browne's cabin which had been given to Adele for a residence while she should remain in Coyote. He was eager to drop the papers where they should be found by the man who had been marked for doom. Then he would go back to Wild Alaric and report.

He reached the shadow of Adele's cabin and dropped on all-fours. To pass the little window would be to arouse the girl's suspicions if she were there waiting for the man with the iron blade. He crept forward on his errand, and glided under the window with the noiselessness of the snake. Foot by foot he moved over the ground holding his breath, and eager to "lose" the papers according to Wild Alaric's commands.

The boy accomplished his mission successfully. The paper was white enough to attract attention in the starlight, and having left the packet where he thought it would be seen by Mark, Quartz Kid crept back with a face flushed with triumph.

"I believe I'll go ter New York an' play detective after I get through hyer," he said with a light laugh to himself. "With ther exception ov my failure ter set ther Coyotes upon Mark, my career has been a success. I'm settin' a cooler foe than Coyote on him ter-night, an' ther days ov ther iron dagger ar' about ended."

It was almost nine o'clock, and the boy who saw no reason for going back to Alaric just then, crouched against another cabin and watched for the Unknown.

While he waited there, Wild Alaric was having a very unwelcome visitor, and one to meet whom he had not come back to Camp Coyote.

He had darkened the cabin as we have seen, by extinguishing the light after Quartz Kid's departure, and in the darkness was waiting for the boy's report. He had not come back unprepared, but with a full supply of weapons, he was ready to cope with any foe who might present himself.

For some time he had waited at the window, but at length, as if tired of standing where nothing was to be seen, he went to the table, and in the gloom found a stool upon which he dropped.

All at once Wild Alaric heard a footstep outside, and with a low ejaculation of "the boy!" he turned his head toward the door.

"This is Alaric's cabin," said a human voice, as the door was pushed ajar by some one on the outside.

The sport was on his feet in an instant. He seemed to recognize the voice, and while he stood erect with his hand on the hilt of a bowie for quick, close work, he waited for further developments.

"He is liable ter find Wild Alaric at home!" he muttered. "Mebbe I've set a trap without knowin' it. Come in!"

The invitation was not spoken in audible tones, but it was accepted all the same.

The door opened wider, and Major Blister's pard saw a human figure between him and the stars.

Alaric prepared for a spring; he could hardly keep back the whoop that bubbled to his lips.

"I may find nothing here, but I'll give ther old hut a search," the visitor went on, and the

next instant followed the snap and the flash of a match.

It was impossible for Alaric to stand a second before the man without being seen. The light that blazed up showed his stalwart figure, and even revealed the preparations he had made for a deadly contest.

It did all this in a very brief space of time.

"The man himself!" cried the person with the match, as he threw it down and then leaped at Alaric so quickly, that ready as he apparently was for anything, he was still unprepared.

The two men came together like two gladiators in the arena.

"Here is one of the five Mark the Unknown will not get!" Alaric heard hissed in his ear. "Circumstances prevented me from meeting you at the two rocks after Gideon's rescue; but I'll make amends for the failure here."

Wild Alaric knew his man before the struggle began. The short existence of the match told him that he was face to face again with Fred Ferret the Broadway Spotter.

Quartz Kid would have called him the Satan-eyed man!

Back over the table and against the hard wall of the cabin went Alaric before he could resist. The charge of the detective was fury itself, and Major Blister's right bower found his bowie jerked from his hand ere he could deal one blow for Alaric.

"I want you beyond this cabin!" said the New Yorker. "This is better luck than I hoped for, Wild Alaric. I came to your hut for a clew, and here I find the living one. One word, my Mulberry street thug, and I'll dye these walls with the contents of your head!"

In two minutes the man, taken completely by surprise, found himself in the hands of the one who held the cold muzzle of a revolver against his head. They had reached the door, now wide open, and Wild Alaric saw the man again, and stood at his mercy.

He could hardly believe that he was a prisoner, but the touch of the steel barrel, and the clutch of Fred Ferret's left hand told him that it was no wild vision with the stars for a canopy.

"You know what to do under circumstances like these," the Broadway Spotter went on. "A man who has had a dozen careers under as many names is no fool in a place like this. March forward, Alaric! I keep at your side. One suspicious movement, one false step, and by the holy stars above us! I'll leave you dead among the cabins of Camp Coyote!"

Behind his lips Wild Alaric shut his teeth and gave the detective a mad glance through his black lashes.

"It's ther first time I ever set a trap for myself," growled the Major's pard. "This is ther man I once walled up in a dungeon in New York an' now he's caught me in ther Black Hills! Wal, I must get another hand—that's all!"

Alaric was moving off with Fred Ferret triumphant and close at his side.

"Which way?" suddenly asked the prisoner.

"Down the trail by which you entered camp; you know where that is."

Alaric turned sullenly to the right and went down the little by-street at the New Yorker's pistol. How he longed for a chance to turn the tables; how he felt his blood flow hot through his temples whenever he looked at the man and thought that he was within reach of one of the owners of the iron daggers and could not strike!

After awhile Quartz Kid came back to Wild Alaric's cabin, but too late to find its owner. The open door seemed to tell the boy spy that the sport of mountain and city was gone.

"The game worked, Alaric," exclaimed the boy. "He came, he found the decoy papers an' afore mornin', Mark ther Unknown will be on ther trail ter ther trap!"

The boy got thus far before he discovered that the dark cabin had no tenant.

"Ain't yer hyer, Alaric?"

As no voice responded he struck a match and held it over his head. The flame enlarged and showed him the table toppling against the wall and the heavy stools upset. Somebody had come to visit Alaric during his absence; there was no mistake.

"Heavens! they've played tiger hyer!" cried Quartz Kid. "But what has become of Alaric?"

CHAPTER XXX.

JERKED FROM THE JAWS.

IF Wild Alaric had been caught in a trap of his own setting, his scheme against Mark the Unknown gave forth promise of success.

Precisely at nine o'clock the black-eyed man came to Burt Browne's cabin where Adele waited for him. To Quartz Kid's disappointment, he stepped over the paper lying in the starlight in front of the door and passed into the hut.

"I'm goin' ter stay hyer till he comes out," said the boy spy, to himself. "He must find Alaric's decoy letter an' map. Ther Major's pard will wait for me in his cabin. I didn't promise ter come back before Mark found ther bait."

He did not have to watch long but just long enough to let Fred Ferret reap the success recorded in the last chapter. At the end of an

hour Mark came out and stopped to bid the girl good-by.

All at once his eyes caught sight of the paper on the ground, and an exclamation announced his discovery.

The next moment his hands held the decoy and Quartz Kid crept up to the cabin and looking in at the window saw Adele and Mark examining the "find" in the light of a lamp.

"A gold mine!" cried Adele, looking up into the avenger's face while her own eyes glistened with enjoyment. "Wild Alaric has lost the letter from his master. The map will lead you to the new rendezvous, Mark. You cannot miss it."

"I will find him now!" said the man. "I feel that the game I have played against fortune so long is about to end. The iron dagger has fallen back into my hands after killing Crimson Con, and now the trail comes to me. What fortune is this, Adele? At last, girl, I see the end, and ere long the iron blade will have rest!"

"After that, what?" asked the girl.

"Heaven knows; but we will let the future shape its own course."

Quartz Kid saw Mark's black orbs twinkle while they studied the map which Wild Alaric had drawn with one of the most diabolical purposes ever harbored by a cool desperado.

"I've seen enough, hyer!" he exclaimed. "Now I'll go back an' hear Alaric chuckle over the success of his scheme."

Back to the cabin went the boy-spy with the results already described; he found the place empty, the table and the stools overturned, and the desperate pard of Major Blister gone.

What had become of Alaric?

Deep in the mountain trail beyond Camp Coyote were two men who walked side by side, one without a weapon of any kind and evidently a prisoner, the other armed with at least one revolver which he carried in his right hand.

"Show me the hiding-place of the man you have left somewhere in the mountain," said the armed person. "You know the trail to this man called Andros Ruby four years ago in New York. I am not to be balked now, for there is an oath recorded where oaths are kept. You know me for the man walled up alive under Mother Redbird's trap in Mulberry street. I am he whom you dogged and decoyed into danger in New York because I was on the trail of five villains of whom your present leader was the chief."

Wild Alaric turned and looked into the speaker's face.

"If I show you whar ther Major is, you'll kill him," he said.

"I will take vengeance," was the reply.

"Vengeance for what—ther banker's death or yer own wallin' up?"

"For both!"

The Coyote sport turned away.

"Won't you show me?" asked the Broadway Spotter.

There was no answer, and Alaric seemed to be contemplating the mountain wall at whose foot they were walking.

"A stubborn man kills himself sometimes," continued Fred Ferret, eying the desperado whose silence seemed intended for exasperation. "Do not think, Alaric, that I have trailed you and your master more than three thousand miles to be baffled by a hand like the one you play. I never expect to see you stand at the bar of the New York courts to answer for the crime that shocked the whole city a few years ago. I shall never turn you over to the tardy justice they exercise there. I am here to find you and Andros Ruby. He is the missing man now. I have found you. Show me his hiding-place. I give you until daylight to do this. If at dawn he is still unfound, I will prevent you forever from joining him!"

The meaning of the last sentence was not mysterious. It told Wild Alaric that the man who walked at his side intended to find Major Blister if he had to conduct the search over his (Alaric's) dead body.

With lips sealed like a mute's the Coyote pard kept down the trail. By-and-by the moon showered her light upon the path and showed Fred Ferret the well-set features of the stubborn man whom he was driving along by the menace of the six-shooter.

Camp Coyote was far behind them, and under the moon its few inhabitants either slept or discussed the events of the last few days at Terrapin Tom's. It was known that twenty men led by the cool and resolute Burt Browne were scouring the mountains for Major Blister for whose neck a stout lariat waited in the hands of the Coyote pards.

"I've set a trap for one man, but hyer I am in ther jaws ov one myself," growled Alaric while he walked down a narrow trail with the morning almost at hand. "I am expected ter take this Broadway devil ter ther Major before dayli ht in order that he may play his death hand. I guess I won't do that. I am waiting for a chance ter show him a trick that will give me the upper hand so that when Mark comes ter ther trap, I've set for him, I kin let the jaws close on him forever. No, no, my New York daisy. Wild Alaric war born under no fool star."

If Fred Ferret had heard these words he might have halted his prisoner where they were spoken and finished his career there and then. He had conducted him through the night over trails of Alaric's own choosing, for he thought that the Coyote sport had not forgotten the threat that if he did not find Major Blister by dawn, his life would be the penalty of failure.

The morning stars were glowing in the cloudless skies and a light wind fanned the faces of the two foes.

In a little while the new morning would burst upon the world, and Wild Alaric would have to face the revolver of the man who had tramped like a stern and merciless avenger at his heels.

The Coyote sport showed no fears for the morning while he kept on. His eye had lost none of its old light; he might have set a dozen new traps during the tramp.

"Halt!"

At this command from Fred Ferret's lips Alaric stopped and glanced at the avenger.

Already the mountain pass was becoming visible in the first streaks of light, and the earliest birds were making music on the dark boughs.

"It is morning," said the Broadway Spotter.

"Where is your captain, Andros Ruby?"

Wild Alaric gave the avenger a look that breathed defiance.

"Very well. I have asked you for the last time, Alaric. The warning was given last night. I spoke it in plain English, and you heard every syllable. It is known that you left Coyote with Major Blister; you came back for a purpose of some kind. Perhaps you had a trap you wanted to set. Traps have always been your hobby, but this time one of them caught the trapper. Stand where you are, Alaric."

Fred Ferret stopped back suddenly and left ten feet between him and the man he had guarded under the moon and in the mountain trails.

"I am going on," he said, "but you are to be left behind, Wild Alaric. Were I in New York I would be compelled to hand you over to the authorities, but here among the Black Hills man is his own avenger. Stand up and die like the desperado you have been in a dozen parts of Uncle Sam's domain!"

Wild Alaric must have thought at that time that his career had reached its end. He saw the revolver creep slowly up till it reached a level with his face, and over the barrel that caught the first glints of day, he looked into the stern eyes of the man from New York.

"Here I avenge the crime of the Delancey mansion, and here I pay you for the torture I endured in Mother Redbird's dungeon," came over the six-shooter. Let me tell you, Wild Alaric, that I have made a strange discovery since reaching the Black Hills. Ten years ago the New York Detective Bureau, to which I belonged, received news of the abduction of two children in San Francisco. They were the children of a man known as Silver Loup. They both disappeared the same night, though it is certain that one man did not take them both. Oh! you know about the case, I see, Alaric. Well, I have discovered the girl."

Wild Alaric started slightly but made no reply.

"The beautiful creature whom Major Blister calls Zoe, in Custer, is really Nita, Silver Loup's child. He expects to make her his when he has played out the game against the iron daggers. You wonder how I made this discovery? I am a detective; unraveling mysteries is my life profession, Alaric. I shall find the boy, Nita's brother, before I am through with the game. As Captain Dandy, Major Blister stole the girl. You may know who dealt with the boy."

"It is a lie! I never touched the case!" flashed Wild Alaric.

"Wait till you are accused," said the detective with a smile. "You will not say that you don't know why Major Blister left Crimson Con dead in his cabin in Coyote?"

Alaric's lips shut the tighter, and his eyes snapped defiance.

"Ah! Alaric, there are crimes that time avenges by the hand of justice," said Fred Ferret. "The Major will never go back to Zoe. Vengeance will find him miles this side of the child he stole in 'Frisco and left in the West, while he ran a career of crime on the Atlantic seaboard. Never mind, Alaric. You have refused to show me his hiding-place, but it shall be found! Now, thug of New York and desperado of the Black Hills, I am going to drop you in your boots!"

The Broadway Spotter took one quick stride forward at the end of his last sentence.

"Halt thar! We've got a trigger grip on that galoot!" rung out a voice as stern as the death sentence of a lynch court.

Fred Ferret did not turn, but threw a look over his shoulder and saw the man who had spoken.

"The men of Coyote," he said to himself, and looking into Wild Alaric's eyes, he saw that he had recognized those who had appeared when least expected.

Up the trail they came, headed by the stalwart figure of Burt Browne, and with six-shooters and repeating rifles gripped in their hands.

"This man is not Major Blister," said Fred Ferret, facing the men, who halted at a wave of their leader's hand. "This is not the person who left Con dead in Coyote."

"No; but he is that Custer bloodhound's pard!" was the reply. "We will get at one through the other. War yer really goin' ter wipe Alaric out?"

"I was, and I will!" said the Broadway Spotter.

"Not just yet!" laughed Burt Browne. "We've got a nose for him, as well as for his master. Don't try ter play a single-handed game ag'in Coyote. It won't work, young man."

Fred Ferret saw the stalwart forms that backed the speaker. These were the avengers of Crimson Con; they wanted the life of Major Blister, and the New Yorker knew that they would be baffled by no human barrier as long as their triggers worked.

"That man has refused to disclose to me the hiding-place of Major Max," said Fred Ferret, pointing at Alaric. "He will not tell you, Burt Browne. I have come three thousand miles to face him as I face him now. You shall not take the life of the villain who made me suffer the torture of a thousand deaths for two days—the man who helped Andros Ruby commit a terrible crime, that orphaned a young girl and made her an avenger. By heavens! you shall not do this!"

The Broadway Spotter sprang forward before the last word had left his lips.

"I will settle with Wild Alaric! He is my prisoner! By the Eternal! I—"

"Not now!"

The hand of Burt Browne descended like a trip-hammer upon the young detective's shoulder.

"Coyote says 'no!'" he cried, and the next moment he hurled Fred Ferret among the pards where half a dozen hands closed on him like the jaws of steel-traps. "We deal with this man to the death. He is Major Blister's pard!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

SLIPPERY ALARIC.

UNARMED, and confronted by the avengers of Crimson Con, Wild Alaric saw no change in his fortunes for the better. He had passed out of the hands of one man into the power of twenty, who would not hesitate to stand him up before their weapons and shoot him to pieces because he was the friend of the desperado who had taken human life in Coyote.

Fred Ferret knew that he could do nothing against the men who had taken his prisoner from him, and they laughed in his face as he tried at first to break from their iron grasp.

"Thar's no use tryin' ter turn ther tables," said Burt Browne with a smile, as he laid his hand softly on the young detective's arm and looked steadily into his face. "We claim a right ter deal with Wild Alaric, an' in doin' so we avenge whatever deeds you may be after him for."

"The blood of Crimson Con is not on his hands," said the Broadway Spotter. "Major Blister committed that crime."

"While his pard thar watched, maybe."

"Who says that, lies!" leaped from Wild Alaric's lips, the first words he had uttered for several minutes.

"Thet's all right," sneered Burt Browne, and his face darkened suddenly under the bitter accusation. "When we want ther lie, we'll ask for it. Cover thar man thar, every pard ov yer," he went on, addressing his bronze band, who instantly obeyed. "Now, my cool sport ov ther mountains, show us ther trail; thet leads ter ther Major."

Fred Ferret looked at the stalwart prisoner, who was looking sullenly into the muzzles of the leveled weapons with his arms folded upon his breast.

"I trust he will," he said to himself. "I have not despaired of paying that villain the old debts contracted among the night-shadows of New York. If he refuses to accede to Burt Browne's demand, he will be riddled with bullets where he stands. What will Wild Alaric do?"

Yes, what would the tiger sport of Coyote do? "We lose no time on this trail," Burt Browne suddenly went on, speaking over the revolver not five feet from Wild Alaric's face. "Quick! out with ther information. Refuse ter tell us, Alaric, an' ther vulture will see yer dead whar yer stand when he rises over ther mountain!"

"I hev never yet betrayed a pard," said Alaric, returning look for look.

"Which means thet yer never will, eh?" was the response.

"I did not say so."

Fred Ferret took hope. On the next few words would hang the whole thing—life and death.

All at once the right hand of the menaced sport went up, and he said solemnly:

"A man will do anything for his life. Men ov Coyote, I may turn on yer one ov these days for this."

"All right, Alaric."

"Then, with this understanding, I show you ther rendezvous."

The mountain pards expressed their satisfaction in their faces. They were willing to exchange Wild Alaric for the man they wanted.

"Fasten his hands," said Burt Browne, and with a glance at the detective he went on. "You will see ther end ov this hunt, sir. Mebbe we'll make it ter yer advantage to do so."

The Broadway Spotter had already decided on seeing the end of the whole affair. It was not his intention to turn back now and leave Wild Alaric in the hands of the Coyote toughs.

In a nit le while the arms of the prisoner were secured in a manner that would not interfere with his gait, and Burt Browne gave orders to march.

A singular look came into Alaric's eyes while he took the first steps forward. He had secured a fresh lease of life, and it was possible that he yet hoped to spring the trap destined to end the careers of Mark, the Unknown, and Fred Ferret.

It will be remembered that he had led the New York detective to the spot where Burt Browne and pards had stepped forward in time to save him from Ferret's revolver. He might then be near the Major's retreat, and it might be miles away. Everything as to its location was uncertain.

Wild Alaric walked over the trail with figure erect, and not much like a man who was covered by twenty revolvers.

"I'll set an' spring the trap in ther long run," he growled to himself. "I admit thet I war never trotted off this way before, with a score ov droppers at my head, an' just now ther outlook has a bilious appearance. But I am still Wild Alaric, an' I will continue ter be till my feet look up at ther sun from ther bed ov some mountain trail."

The tramp seemed to lengthen into an endless journey as the sun came up and soared toward the zenith. The men at Wild Alaric's back showed their impatience as mile after mile was tramped over, with no signs of halting.

"Won't he never stop?" exclaimed Fred Ferret, watching the prisoner. "If he is playing a game for his life, he is playing it well, but I do not understand it."

At last Alaric halted of his own accord, and threw a glance over his shoulder at the men, who were up in a moment.

"I guess we've got thar," he said, looking into Burt Browne's face.

The leader of the Coyote pards looked around and saw no signs of a rendezvous. The band had halted at the foot of a mountain, whose side was rather precipitous, and covered with timber, and here and there clumps of bushes.

"We want no foolery—remember!" he said to Alaric.

"Just as if I sell goods less than a yard wide," said the prisoner with a faint smile. "I suppose I'm ter be marched inter my pard's presence with my hands tied thus, showin' him thet Alaric has turned traitor."

"No, you're not," cried Burt Browne, and a moment later his bowie, flashing for a second in the sunlight, severed the Sport's bonds, and his hands were free.

"If ther rendezvous is hyer, I don't see it," the leader of the toughs went on.

"Thet's because you don't know whar ter look," was the answer. "Follow me, but at as respectable distance as yer can under ther circumstances, an' I will show yer ther man you want."

Wild Alaric went forward again and disappeared suddenly among some bushes, that closed behind him like a door. Headed by Burt Browne himself, the Coyote pards plunged forward and discovered—what?

A loud cry announced the discovery.

Burt Browne had stopped before an opening into the mountain-side, which resembled the mouth of a pit, and he and his men stared into it, with Wild Alaric fairly out of sight!

Furious curses were heard on every side, and their echo came back from among the gloomy depths of the cavern.

"Thet's what I call a cool trick," muttered Burt Browne, and when he wheeled upon Fred Ferret he saw a quiet smile and a twinkling eye.

"You would not let me settle with the villain," said the New Yorker, "and now it looks very much as if he will one day settle with you."

"Never!" exclaimed Burt Browne. "This hole in ther mountain will not stop us. Ther mountain galoot is unarmed."

"But the Major may be in there armed to the teeth."

"If thar war a tribe ov reds in ther cave we'd keep on ther trail. Ther grave ov Crimison Con is behind us. He war never my pard ter a great extent, Ferret, but he war a Coyoter an' that's enough!"

Meanwhile, the cool desperado who had adroitly escaped from the clutches of the Coyoters was pushing through dense gloom toward the great chamber of the mountain cavern. He knew that he had entered the cave before whose mouth he had left Major Blister prior to his return to Coyote to bait the trap for Mark the Unknown. Now all he had to do was to find the Major, and to acquaint him with the terrible adventures that had brought him back.

He pushed rapidly down the corridor expecting to hear the men from Coyote at his heels. He was wholly unarmed and if they followed him, he would have to turn and sell his life with the ferocity of a tiger.

But nobody plunged after him, and he drew up amid Stygian darkness in a chamber whose walls and ceiling he could not touch.

"I'm hyer by a shrewd little game ov my own playing," he laughed till the cavern echoed back his words. "Now let me get a grip on one ov ther six-shooters carried by ther Major an' I'll show Burt Browne an' his pards that ther bite ov a caged wolf is death."

Moving to the right for a short distance, Wild Alaric touched a wall and then drew a match along its abraded surface. As the flame leaped up he touched it to a pine cone which instantly took fire.

"Major, I'm hyer but with ther dogs ov Coyote at my back," he said aloud. "Come this way an' let me clutch a six-shooter. Then we'll go back an' lay a dozen out on a mountain coolin' board—all for sendin' me a dozen miles with my hands tied!"

There was no reply, and somewhat disappointed and mystified, Wild Alaric went forward with the torch over his head.

"Halt!" suddenly rung out in startling tones. Wild Alaric stopped on the instant.

"You needn't throw up your hands for I see that you are not armed," the voice continued. "Hold your cave light where you have it now. You are Wild Alaric the friend of the man we caught here when we least expected him. What was that you said about coming here with the Coyoters at your back?"

The cool Sport was too astonished to reply to these sentences. He could see the speaker, a very young man who held a revolver forward, while he stood erect and showed a determined visage.

"Ho! you are ther clerk of the Dolores in Custer City," he said at last.

"I am Cyrus Slinkum," was the reply.

"Whar is ther Major?"

"Heaven knows. There were three of us in this cave a few hours ago."

"Three?" echoed Alaric.

"Gideon Goldbird, the Major and I."

"Jehosophat!" cried the Major's pard.

"What's become ov Gideon?"

"He is where the Major is."

"And he—"

"Is where I don't know."

For a moment Wild Alaric seemed to doubt the sanity of the youth who stood before him and spoke thus.

"Go on an' give me ther lay-out," he said.

"You don't know how many men I have at my heels."

"Gideon and I were here when Major Blister came," said Cyrus. "It did not take us long to show him that he had unconsciously walked into a trap which we had no intention of setting. He and Gideon resumed the old quarrel about the journey to New York, and the man in the dungeon there. Before I could interfere they had grappled and were having it rough and tumble over the stone floor. Gideon was weak from the terrible wound given by the iron blade of the black-eyed man, but he gave the Major a fight that astonished him. All at once they disappeared."

"They found the pit!" exclaimed Wild Alaric. "Did they go down tergether?"

"Yes—looked in each other's embrace."

"They haven't a chance in a thousand!"

"Wild Alaric walked forward heedless of the fugitive clerk's revolver; he seemed to have forgotten the young man's presence."

"Hellol!" he suddenly cried, "who hung this lariat down into the pit?"

"I did," said Cyrus coming forward. "I found it in the cave and fastened it as you see. At first I intended to go down on the hunt of Gideon, but I must own that my courage failed me."

"You called ter him?"

"Yes, but not a word in reply."

Without speaking, Wild Alaric lit another cone and sent it spinning down the abyss. It threw out a vivid light as it whirled over and over and striking, soon sent up a shower of sparks.

"Hark!" said Cyrus grasping the Sport's arm. "The men behind you must have entered the cave."

Wild Alaric dropped his torch and caught the lariat. The next moment he lowered his body over the edge of the pit before the youth's face and went rapidly downward.

Cyrus Slinkum saw the rope stretched for half a minute and then it disappeared.

A quick jerk from below had removed it from the pointed rock to which it had been tied, and the clerk of Dolores could stare into space below and curse the man who had left him to face the men of Coyote.

"That is the last card of a desperate man," the youth said. "He would sooner make the grave of the Major and Gideon his own than turn back and die like a human. They know nothing about me, and now that Andros Ruby is dead, there is none to threaten me with the law."

Cyrus turned away with the burning cone held over his head, and he had not taken five steps when a loud voice saluted his ears.

"Halt thar, boy."

The fugitive hotel clerk instantly obeyed and looked into the revolvers of the Coyote pards.

CHAPTER XXXII.

CUPID GETS A BLACK EYE.

It was the night after these somewhat startling events and Burt Browne and his men had returned to Coyote which camp also held Cyrus Slinkum who, for the first time in a long while, felt at his ease.

The young hotel clerk was thinking of making Coyote his future home for a while at least for he had naught to fear from Major Blister whom he had seen tumble headlong into the cavern pit locked in Gideon Goldbird's embrace.

"I don't know but that this is the place for me, after all," mused Cyrus when he had looked the situation over carefully. "Here the New York law dogs will never find me and Andros Ruby who will never feel the iron dagger between his ribs will not threaten me with the penitentiary. After all, I left Custer in good time. No stages here from Sidney, and no New Yorker likely to recognize me will drop down upon this camp."

Cyrus leaned back against the wall of the cabin he occupied, elevated his feet to the top of the not very elegant table and sent a number of smoke rings toward the rafters from the cigar he had obtained at Terrapin Tom's.

The only non-resident of the camp beside himself at that time was Adele, and the young man had seen her in the door of Burt Browne's cabin at sundown.

"By Jove!" suddenly exclaimed Cyrus, "there might be a chance for me there! She's got no especial protector now, and I know enough to make myself agreeable to any young lady. They say that she is mixed up somehow with Mark the Unknown, and also with the gray-eyed man who distinguished himself in Custer by tearing a letter from Quartz Kid's hands. Notwithstanding this, if it is true, I don't see why I shouldn't get into her graces, for a girl like her is liable to turn out an heiress one of these days."

For Cyrus to think thus was to act immediately, and a few minutes served to take him to the cabin occupied by Adele. The door was opened before his first rap had died away and he was invited inside in tones that instantly captivated him.

"I have been wishing that you would come," said the girl. "I want to hear the story from your lips. Burt has told me what he heard from you. Your narrative will complete the wild romance of the mountain cave."

"You want to hear how the Major went to his death with Gideon I presume?"

"That is it precisely."

Cyrus took much pride in recounting to the girl the adventures he had met with in the cavern, and while he talked he saw her eyes light up with disappointment.

"Do you really think the man called Andros Ruby went to his death?" inquired Adele at the conclusion of the story.

"There is not the least doubt of it, I am happy to say," was the reply.

"Burt Browne is certain of it."

"So are all his pards."

"But the disappearance of Wild Alaric who descended into the pit on the lasso and then took it away—what do you think of it?"

"It means simply starvation. No man can get out of that pit unassisted. I am sorry on your account, miss, for I see that you didn't want those two men to die in that manner."

"I did not!" exclaimed Adele. "They have escaped the iron dagger if they are dead, and in a certain sense their great crime will stand forever unavenged. Why did not Burt and his pards explore the pit?"

"In the first place, they took it for granted that ther Major and Gideon were dead, and, in ther next, with Wild Alaric alive somewhere in it, a descent might have proved dangerous to the explorers. If I war half as dead as I think those men are, I'd be skirmishing about for a coffin and a suitable place in which to listen for Gabriel's trumpet."

It would be perfectly safe to infer from the fugitive clerk's remarks, that he considered the last of the infamous Gotham gang safely out of the way. He spoke with a positiveness that seemed to dissipate the last doubts of the girl, and for a long time afterward she sat silent in the light of the little lamp.

"I will wait till Mark comes back," she said, as if speaking to herself, although she spoke aloud.

"What did the other man say?" suddenly asked Cyrus.

The girl looked up into his face.

"Fred Ferret I mean," continued the young man. "He came back with Burt and his gang?"

"Yes, but he did not stay long. He is away now."

"But what did he say about the doom of the three men?"

"He had few hopes left."

"Does he want them to escape the fate they found?"

"Yes."

"Well, he will never touch them with the iron blade he carries," said Cyrus. "Now since it is all over, will you not tell me who Mark is?"

Adele started and drew back.

"I hope you don't think that the end has not been reached," cried the clerk. "I don't see any use in keeping a secret like this any longer. Who is Mark, anyhow?"

"Not yet, Cyrus Slinkum," said Adele, with a smile. "We will wait till the last hand has been played."

The late clerk of the Dolores leaned back and laughed.

"I'd like to know who's going to play it?" he exclaimed. "By Jupiter! I'd like to take a peep at the cards, too."

He ceased suddenly, and leaned toward the girl with an expression of seriousness on his face.

"Don't you think, Adele, that it would be a good idea for us to unite our fortunes?" he asked. "You will pardon me, I sincerely hope, but I can't help asking this question. The man called Mark cannot be to you the companion a young lady of your disposition will need in this wild country, and as for Fred Ferret—no person will want to cling to a man whose business is that of hunting his fellow men with a dagger! In view of these facts, Miss Adele, I propose that we unite our fortunes and set up for ourselves in Coyote or elsewhere, and—"

"There!" said the girl coloring deeply as she touched Cyrus Slinkum's arm with her hand. "I will not listen to words like yours from any lips to-night. Remember that I came to the Black Hills to help the iron blades you speak of. Remember that I am the person who felt the cruelty of the crimes of Andros Ruby and his gang, and forget not that I hope that this wild game, this hunt for human hearts—is not played out. No, Cyrus Slinkum—no love-making in my presence!"

Adele spoke with all the firmness she could assume, but her words did not abash the young man who was not to be balked.

"If you don't fancy Coyote as a place of future residence, we could find another more congenial," he resumed. "I'm no millionaire, Adele, but—"

"Enough!" cried the girl, her eyes suddenly flashing as she rose still confronting the fugitive clerk. "I will not listen to you. I did not wish that you might come here to hear a declaration of pretended love."

"Pretended—love?" gasped Cyrus. "Hang me for a road-agent! my dear girl—"

"They'd almost hang you for forgery if they had you in New York!" was the interruption that almost took Cyrus from his feet.

He went back with a quick gasp and a white face. As he stared at Adele his eyes seemed to leap from his head; he looked like a person who had seen a thunderbolt fall at his feet.

What! did the girl know that he was a fugitive from New York justice? Had Major Blister told her that he was Jasper Judd, and not Cyrus Slinkum, and that he dared not go back to the great city on the Atlantic seaboard?

"That's something that sounds like a riddle," said Cyrus at last seeing that he had to reply in some manner to the sentence that had astonished him.

"It should be very plain," continued Adele. "If you will take your departure with my thanks for your narrative of the cave events, we will stop here."

But Cyrus did not move.

"She shot at random," he said to himself. "I'm going to tell her that I'm not to be balked thus. My dear girl—"

"No more!" cried Adele sternly, as her hand, suddenly lifted, pointed to the door. "I have already put up with the presence of Jasper Judd the bank robber long enough. There is the door, sir! It is open and the night awaits you."

There was no doubt now.

"Who told you?" cried Cyrus. "By the fiends! if I had my revolver at Major Blister's head, dead as he is, I would blow it to pieces!"

"I never got my knowledge from that desperado!" laughed Adele. "You forget, sir, that I lived in New York when you had to fly from your crime. You have forfeited to-night all the friendship I might have given you. Insult me again with your presence, and we will see that some one else knows that the missing bank-clerk has been found."

Cyrus, who was at the door, suddenly showed his teeth like a wolf.

"All right!" he hissed. "If I am found out you may discover that I'm no child. I am Jasper Judd, and I don't care who knows it."

"Then go back and throw yourself on the mercy of the courts."

"I'd sooner pitch myself over the battlements of Tartarus! By Jupiter! Adele, I will face the music if it ever comes, and you will regret the epithets you threw into the face of Cyrus Slinkum. I'm in the Black Hills, but I'm a young wildcat when they stir me up. For years I've been desperate, expecting to be called Jasper Judd at any time."

"Guilt has been the ghost that never leaves you," said Adele. "We will get along with no further acquaintance, Cyrus Slinkum. Good-night!"

Out in the starlight, with blazing eyes and clinched hands the guilty clerk stood for a few moments, eying the girl's cabin like a tiger.

"Here's a go I didn't pay for," he ejaculated. "They drop themselves upon a fellow when he expects a shower of roses. That beauty was the last person from whom I expected a blow like this. I am Jasper Judd to another inhabitant of the Black Hills! I don't like that, for a secret in a woman's bosom always finds the cage doors open. The matrimonial alliance is spoiled now. I think I precipitated my schemes a little too fast. I'll go to my shanty and think calmly for a spell."

He walked toward the cabin he had left awhile before with rosy plans and high hopes, but now he ground his teeth whenever he thought of the outcome of his venture and cursed himself many times for his precipitation.

Entering the cabin and slamming the door madly behind him, he threw himself upon the nearest stool and struck the table with his fist.

"Play the fool another time, Cyrus," he flashed, "and you'll find yourself pounding pegs in Sing Sing. Hello, what's this?"

He caught sight of a piece of paper on the table at that moment, and pounced upon it like a hawk upon a partridge.

"I don't know who would send me a letter," he said, as he unfolded the packet. "Let me see what it says."

It took him but a moment to open the letter, and, in the light of the lamp, he read as follows:

"JASPER JUDD (wanted for forgery, etc., in New York):—"

"Camp Coyote is no safe place for a man of your strip. You are standing on a dynamite bomb, which is liable to blow you back to New York at any moment. If I were you, I wouldn't let the sun see me in this mountain corral. I warn you in time. This is a b-a-d place for you."

There was no signature to this startling document. If there had been one, it would not have increased the young man's terror.

"Hemmed in everywhere!" he cried. "The whole camp must know that I am the New York fugitive. What's the use of fighting fate any longer after this? By the horns of Satan! I will never go back to the scene of my deeds."

He stepped back with a wild flash in his eyes, and drew a revolver. The lock clicked as he lifted it to his head.

"Come! don't be a fool, Cyrus Slinkum!" exclaimed the person who leaped up from the darkest corner of the cabin and dashed his arm aside. "Blow yer brains out, an' hang me if I don't telegraph East that Jasper Judd shot himself like a coward!"

Cyrus looked down into the face of the boy spy of Custer.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

WILD ALARIC'S TRAP.

WE must not lose sight of Mark, the Unknown, and the man who had picked up the bait of Wild Alaric's trap.

If he had been in Camp Coyote when Cyrus Slinkum visited Adele with a very pleasant end in view, it is probable that the interview would have terminated in a somewhat different manner, but while it was taking place the Unknown was far from the place, following the trail as laid down in the decoy map.

"Major Blister does not know that the iron blade has fallen back into my hands!" exclaimed the industrious trailer. "I long to meet him—the cool villain!—and play the last hand in this tragic game. It opened in New York four years ago; it is to terminate in the Black Hills."

We need not follow the wielder of the iron blade over the windings of the trail which Wild Alaric had drawn correctly for him.

He did not know that Burt Browne and his pards had found the tiger sport in the hands and at the mercy of Fred Ferret, that they had rescued him to lose him in the cave to which he had conducted them, and that they had returned to Coyote firmly believing that the career of Major Blister and his companions had terminated.

By the merest chance Mark the Unknown missed the Coyoters in the mountains. If he had found them he would have pressed on for nothing could have kept that determined avenger from the cave which Wild Alaric had been pleased to call a trap.

The stars came out, the stars went down and rose again. Mark the Unknown was still picking out that trail mile by mile, and his pertinacity was that of the bloodhound which when once on the scent never leaves it until he has fastened his fangs on his victim.

It was night once more when the cool trailer reached the mouth of the cavern of thrilling events already detailed on these pages.

A consultation of the map told him that he had reached the important place. He felt the iron dagger in its sheath and entered the corridor.

Nothing was to balk that man, nothing could turn him back for a moment.

Down the dark corridor with ears on the alert—he had no use for eyes—Mark the Unknown crept to the large chamber some distance ahead.

Along his sleeve lay the blade with which he had hunted five men with the ferocity of a wolf, and ready now it was for the last close combat for victory.

Not a sound reached his ears while he stood erect in the gloom of the main chamber and listened.

He had reached Major Blister's retreat, but where was the man himself?

For a moment the man from Gotham felt like penetrating the darkness with a challenge that would bring the enemy forth. He did not care whether the Major came forth alone, or with his mountain pard, Wild Alaric. All he wanted was to finish the long hunt there and to finish it forever.

But twenty minutes passed without a noise. If the cavern had bats for tenants, they did not flap their wings in Mark's face. The very silence was annoying.

All at once there came from the depths of the Stygian gloom that confronted him a cry so terribly human yet devilish that the avenger started. It seemed to emanate from some point beneath the stone floor on which he stood, but yet it was far off.

"For Heaven's sake, kill me!" followed the cry. "What's ther use ov a feller goin' through life a few days longer, maimed for the grave? Horns ov Hades! this is what a man gets for faithfulness! Alaric! Alaric! have you no mercy?"

Mark went forward, keeping along the wall at his right.

"I ought to know that voice!" he murmured; "I have certainly heard it before," and then, when a second appeal for mercy came from the same direction, he stopped suddenly and cried:

"It is Gideon Goldbird! Is it possible that I have found my wounded hawk, instead of Major Blister?"

The silence that followed the last cry was broken by a laugh that came up from the gloom like a sound from a vault.

"Somebody is inflicting torture on that poor wretch. Where he is I shall find Wild Alaric, for he has just called on that graceless scamp for mercy."

A few yards further on the avenger found him at the edge of a pit which was as dark as the chamber about him.

"Mercy! mercy! Oh God! my hands!"

Mark the Unknown caught up a pine cone and dropped it over the edge of the pit. It struck in a moment.

"It is not over twenty feet down," he said to himself, as he drew back. "I am here to find the last tigers of the gang, and may Heaven turn my oath against me if I shrink now!"

He drew off his boots and set them against the wall, then clutching the blade of the iron dagger between his teeth he went back to the pit.

The next moment he had lowered his body over the brink, and was feeling the wall below with his toes. The wall was rough, but not rough enough to give him a place by which to lower himself by degrees. Mark hung along the stone in the midst of Cimmerian gloom, almost forced to go on, for he was not in a position to go back unless with great difficulty.

Another cry decided him.

"Hell will gape for you for this, Andros Ruby! Mercy!—mercy!—mer—"

Mark the Unknown released the cope of the pit and dropped!

"Hit or miss, here goes for a last tussle with the tigers!" he said.

The fall was not a lengthy one, for he struck in an instant and without a particle of noise, nor in the least hurt. So far, good; and as Mark picked himself up, he let slip a word of congratulation.

"Now for the underground game!" he exclaimed.

He turned to see some distance away the faint glimmer of a light as of a fire half smothered, and if anything was wanting to tell him that there he would find Gideon Goldbird it was speedily removed by a groan.

With a revolver in his hand, as if he expected to need it first, the New York trailer glided forward along a wall which he could see at intervals as he approached the light.

When he stopped he leaned forward and looked at the horrible spectacle that met his gaze.

In the light of a small fire that threw a faint light on the walls that hemmed it in lay a man on his back. His arms were lashed to his sides by means of a black rope like a lariat, but there were no hands.

Mark could see this with his keen eyes, and his teeth met madly while he looked.

"I hope ther iron blade'll find 'em both!" cried the man on the ground. "This is ther end ov Gideon Goldbird, who swore that he would go back ter Custer with a mustache like ther one he took ter New York when Andros Ruby sent him thar. Because I grappled with him in ther cave above and helping him over ther pit's edge at ther risk ov both ov our necks, I am ter die hyer without any hands. A wolf wouldn't treat a traitor pard like this. May they find

ther iron dagger that cut me ther other night. I wish I could set Mark on their track, but he will not come in time."

"I am here!" exclaimed Mark himself as he sprung forward, but Gideon did not hear him.

The next moment the man with the iron dagger reached the spot where the dying sport lay, and his hand touched Gideon's arm.

"I am here, Gideon," he said, looking down into the eyes that stared at him as if he had risen from the dead,

"You?—Mark?"

"Mark!"

"By Jehosaphat! I wish I had a hand an' a bowie in it," grated Gideon. "But what's ther use ov thet when I'm in this fix with death about ter throw ther winnin' ace? So you have come, Mark?"

"Yes! where are they?"

"Alaric an' Andros?"

"The last two!"

"Foller ther corridor thet begins behind me. This cavern is a honeycomb of dens. I can only say, foller ther lead behind me. They went thet way—not very fast, for ther Major got ther worse ov our tumble from ther main room above! This place was intended ter be a trap for yer, Mark—Alaric's trap."

"It shall be his last trap!" was the answer.

"If yer want ter find 'em, go! When you hev finished ther play let me see ther iron dagger thet has hunted us all down at last! Ar' yer goin'?"

"I am gone!"

Mark had sprung up and taken a long stride toward the corridor designated by Gideon.

"Watch!" called the handless sport after him.

"If they scent yer, Mark, they'll yet make this underground den Alaric's death-trap!"

A light laugh, full of fearlessness, came back to the pale speaker in the firelight, and Mark was about to leap into the corridor when a stern cry kept him back.

"Alaric's trap it is, Mark ther Unknown!"

The man of the iron blade turned quickly, and in an instant saw the person who had spoken these words.

Not five feet from Gideon stood the stalwart figure of Wild Alaric, and if ever he resembled a tiger in aspect, it was then.

His brawny arms, bare to the elbows, were thrown forward, and at the end of each was held a formidable six-shooter, which seemed to grin triumph in the avenger's face!

Near by, but leaning against the wall was another man, more ferocious in aspect than Alaric, for his face was partly bandaged with a red handkerchief, over which glared a pair of devilish eyeballs.

Andros Ruby!

"Yer took ther bait in Coyote, eh, Mark?" laughed Wild Alaric over the revolvers. "Arter all, I made ther girl, Adele, my bait, for yer came back ter visit her, an' found ther letter an' ther map. Ha, ha! beat ther double, Sport, in ther long run, if yer kin! How is this for a trap, Mark? Throw up yer hands an' step forward inter ther light. Ther deadliest revolvers in ther Black Hills cover yer now, an' from ther jaws ov Alaric's trap ther is no escape! Hands up!"

Andros Ruby, who seemed consumed with impatience, started from the wall.

"This is the end of the iron dagger!" he exclaimed. "Mark the Unknown, you have found the last men of the Gotham gang. You have come two thousand miles to feel the hand that always kills! Found in Custer, you have followed me here. Behind me is Poker Perry, daggered in the shade of the Dolores, and Night-Owl Oil killed in Coyote. Yonder lies the only man that ever turned against me, and I have deprived him of the hands that caught my throat a few hours ago. I lost the iron dagger in Coyote, but I see you have found it. Good! There is nothing too terrible for Andros Ruby to do. I shall pierce your heart with the iron blade, and hang it above the door of Burt Browne's cabin, now the home of the girl Adele! Hands up! as Alaric says, Mark! The last hand and the winning one is Andros Ruby's!"

The words died away in an echo far down the corridor behind the doomed avenger.

The two pards who looked into Mark's face saw his lips suddenly compress, but his eyes did not quail.

"Hands up for you, blooded flends?" he cried. "I have never hunted you for this! If this is your trap, Wild Alaric, make the most of it. Mark Delancey never surrenders!"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

PLAYING THE GAME OUT.

At the sound of the name, Andros Ruby sent out a wild exclamation.

"Is that your name—Delancey?" he cried.

"I have told you!" was the reply.

Gideon Goldbird, lying on the ground in the light of the fire, turned and looked into Mark's face.

"Mark Delancey!" he muttered. "Ther brother of the man we finished in New York, when we went to crack ther steel safe. This is why he has hunted us with ther iron dagger, but Alaric an' ther Major hev ther drop on him now, an' he'll never play his game out."

Mark Delancey faced the two men with the coolness and defiance of a hunter brought to bay.

The weapons of Wild Alaric still covered him, and the fingers of the Sport were at the triggers.

"Well, Mark Delancey, you have played a cool hand up to this time," laughed Ruby.

"You are the brother who arrived from India after Ralph Delancey was dead?"

"I am that man!"

"Now, we will show you that your last hand is played out. Alaric?"

Wild Alaric threw his master a quick glance.

"Since your trap has caught the man with the iron dagger, I will let you finish him," he went on. "There stands before you the man who found Poker Perry and Night-Owl Oil—the man who has been our shadow for months—the avenging brother of Ralph Delancey. Shoot him dead!"

Mark Delancey saw the lips of Wild Alaric compress suddenly, and a wild light flashed up in his eyes as they glanced again over the revolvers.

The next second there sounded in the cavern not the loud report of the Sport's revolvers, but a piercing human cry, and the Major's pard sprung forward and reeled against the wall!

"Heavens! who did that?" exclaimed Gideon, who had been waiting for the shot that would end Delancey's trail.

Wild Alaric had dropped already at the foot of the wall, and Andros Ruby, who started toward him, saw the hilt of a bowie above his back!

"This is the work of the other accursed blade!" he grated, and a moment later he wheeled toward the entrance.

"Yes, this is my work at last, Andros Ruby," said a voice, and where fire-light and shadow met, the Sport of Two Cities saw the figure of a man whom he recognized.

"This is for my torture in New York," continued the new man who blocked the Major's way. "I am permitted to play at last when the game is almost ended the hand I have held these many months. Look, Andros Ruby! I cover you with a revolver. Throw up your hands!"

"By Jove! Fred Ferret has ther drop on ther Major at last!" exclaimed Gideon. "He throws a bowie like an Injun. Now I will get pay for my missing hands. This is retribution, Andros Ruby. You'll beat me yet through ther gates ov eternity."

Mark Delancey thus unexpectedly delivered, looked like a man in a trance. The fall of Alaric before his eyes was the last thing looked for under the circumstances, and he saw with no pleasure that his rescuer was the Broadway Spotter.

Andros Ruby, driven to the post, with his last pard lying at the foot of the wall, sullenly put up his hands.

Fred Ferret advanced into the broader light, with the revolver still leveled at the Major, but once he threw a swift glance at Mark.

"I told him never to interfere with my game, but he has," said the Unknown, under his breath. "I warned him not to strike the men I hunted. I have to show him that I am the avenger of Ralph Delancey. I hope, for Adele's sake, that Wild Alaric yet has fight in him!"

For several minutes Major Blister stood before Fred Ferret, waiting for his doom. He did not see Mark come down upon him with the noiseless tread of a panther, and he was not aware of his presence till a hand dropped upon his shoulder.

"It is I, Andros," laughed the avenger, as the Sport turned to look into his face. "We will now see who holds the winning hand!"

"I do," said the young detective. "Unhand that man! Step back, Mark Delancey, or I will shoot the Major from your hands!"

Mark, the Unknown, looked into the Spotter's eyes and dropped his hand. Major Blister, standing between the two men, leaned against the wall and glanced at Alaric. Oh! for a moment of that man-tiger's interference!

All at once the man on the ground moved slightly, and the next second, before he could be covered by the quickest weapon, Wild Alaric sprung up with a cry that made the cavern ring.

His revolvers had dropped from his hands, and the dagger, hurled with such terrific force by Fred Ferret, was still in his back.

He looked like a madman when he turned upon the Broadway Spotter.

"Charge, Major—charge!" he yelled. "Down with the iron blades ov New York!"

At the same moment he threw himself forward with terrible force, and straight at the young detective who had been watching Ruby.

"Shoot thet tiger!" cried Gideon, from the floor, and the next second the cavern was filled with the smoke and report of a revolver.

Wild Alaric fell against the wall but bounded away like a ball, and straight at the detective, who had been compelled to shoot on the instant.

He reached Fred Ferret before another shot could be fired, and Gideon and Mark saw the two men grapple and totter away.

"My trap catches whoever comes between its jaws!" grated Wild Alaric. "We will see who plays his hand out first, my New York fox!"

Ther grip ov Alaric is surer death than ther dungeons of Mulberry street. Aha! what's this but death at yer throat now, Broadway?"

All this, the sudden change in the wounded sport, the charge, the shot and the grapple, did not seem to occupy two seconds. It was startling enough to throw Mark Delancey forward, and his two hands descended like eagle talons upon Alaric.

"I'll play it out, Alaric," he exclaimed, and he attempted to separate the two men who were down with the fingers of the Major's hand tearing at the New Yorker's throat.

Major Blister was for the moment forgotten, and when Mark had jerked Wild Alaric from his antagonist, and was holding him out, he heard a cry from Gideon.

"You've let ther boss tiger ov the cage git away," cried the handless rough.

Wild Alaric laughed in the avenger's face.

"Gideon's got it right, Mark Delancey," he said. "You'll hear from Andros yet. This cave is honeycombed an' my trap will yet get ther best ov ther iron daggers! I guess a part ov ther old gang will play ther game out after all."

Mark Delancey heard Alaric's words with little concern.

"One at a time!" he laughed in return. "It was Poker Perry first, then Night-Owl Oil, next Gideon thar, now you, Alaric, and lastly Andros Ruby!"

The reply was a startling one—the loud report of a revolver from the corridor behind the Avenger!

Mark Delancey released Wild Alaric, and reeled toward Gideon who instinctively threw up his bloody stumps.

"Thet's ther Major's old tactics!" said the mutilated Sport, as Mark pitched over him against the wall. "Jehu! ain't they playin' ther game out lively?"

Wild Alaric saw Mark fall and then started toward the man who had fired the shot.

"They shall know that I am the most dangerous when the end is here!" cried this person, who looked hideous with the red handkerchief bound about his forehead. "Let Alaric die whar he is. There is vengeance yet in the grip of Andros Ruby."

Wild Alaric did not get twenty feet from the spot where Mark left him when the shot was fired. His strength seemed to leave him without warning and he dropped like a man smitten with death.

At the same time the Broadway Spotter who had just recovered from the terrible choking administered by Wild Alaric started toward Mark Delancey lying on his face a few feet away.

"You'd better foller ther bronze devil thet did thet," said Gideon, watching him. "He'll get ther drop on you in ther light, an'—"

The sentence was broken by a second shot, and Fred Ferret started back before he reached Mark.

"I told yer so!" said Gideon.

The next moment the young detective sprung at the little fire and knocked it in every direction.

"I'll hunt the last man in the dark," he said aloud. "When I come back, Gideon, I'll be able to report the game played through."

"I do know," was the reply. "The last tiger is the worst one after all. Be keeful, Fred Ferret. Andros Ruby will turn an' make it mighty hot for yer."

There was no reply, for the Broadway Spotter was gone, and Gideon Goldbird saw the two motionless figures that were faintly revealed by the scattered embers of the little fire.

For some time the handless sport lay on the ground with the loss of blood gradually sapping his life, and the embers went out one by one.

"I'll never go back ter Custer with a new mustache," he said aloud to himself. "It war an evil day when I tied myself ter Andros Ruby. Wal, what's ther use ov squealin' now. Thar's no balm in Gilead fer Gideon Goldbird; but by Jupiter! I would like ter live ter hear Fred Ferret's report."

After a while he looked toward the dark corridor and murmured:

"I'd—like—ter—hear it—but—I—never will!"

That was all. He had half-raised his body, but it fell back suddenly, and the messenger sport lay still.

Two hours afterward a man stole into the little cave and stumbled over a human body.

"Hello!" he exclaimed.

The next moment he struck a match and ignited a pine cone.

There lay Wild Alaric with rigid limbs and staring eyes, and near him lay Gideon Goldbird—dead. Mark Delancey was missing.

"Maybe he'll finish the Major yet!" laughed the man with the match.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE IRON BLADE ONCE MORE.

It was the fourth night after the tragic scenes in Wild Alaric's last underground trap, and Quartz Kid the boy spy of Custer was looking across a table in Camp Coyote into the face of our old acquaintance Cyrus Slinkum when the

hotel clerk sprung up at a sound that had no significance in Kid's ears.

"You've kept me here long enough," he exclaimed. "Somehow or other every sound I hear makes me think that somebody is about to lay hands on me for that New York matter. I'm going away."

"Whar to?" asked Quartz Kid looking into the young clerk's white face with a grin.

"Somewhar—I don't care where," was the answer. "Adele knows that I am Jasper Judd, you know it, and Heaven knows who else."

"An' so ye'r goin', Cyrus?"

"I am! You've kept me here three days which have seemed three years. It's worth my peace to stay here another day."

"Very well. Ef you run across ther Major—"

Cyrus broke his companion's sentence with a strange cry.

"Do you think I'll meet him?"

"Why not?" smiled Quartz Kid. "You know that Fred Ferret killed only Wild Alaric in ther cave, Gideon Goldbird died of his wounds, an' Andros Ruby, or ther Major, eluded him."

For a moment the fugitive hotel clerk said nothing, but looked across the table into the tantalizing face of the boy spy.

"If I thought I would meet that man, I'd die here," he murmured at last. "It is true, as you say, Quartz, that Andros Ruby is still at large: but as Mark has not come back, may we not hope that he is on the trail of the lost man?"

"That looks reasonable. See hyer, Cyrus, you can start back to Custer ter-morrow with Adele an' ther Broadway Spotter."

"To Custer?" cried the hotel clerk. "Where Claude Cressy and his Vigilantes know that I am Jasper Judd? I'd just as soon go to New York direct!"

"All right!" laughed the boy spy. "I hope you'll find a soft pillow somewhar, Cyrus. If I war yu, I'd—"

Quartz Kid stopped and slowly shook his head.

"No! I'll not offer any suggestions," he went on extending his hand. "Good-by, Cyrus."

The hands of the two youths met over the table, and the young clerk went toward the door. He did not like to leave, yet he wanted to get beyond the shadow of his one crime. He stopped at the threshold and looked at the young Custerite, then he jerked the door open and bounded out into the night.

"I'll peep in on Adele before I bid Coyote adieu," he said to himself. "She played smash with my love-making the other night, and made me afraid of my own shadow, but by Jupiter! one of these days I'll pay her back."

He walked toward Burt Browne's shanty, and soon saw the little structure loom between him and the stars.

The night was not far advanced, yet Coyote seemed asleep, and the only sounds that came to his ears were now and then the voices of men from Terrapin Tom's den.

"In Jupiter's name, what does that mean?" suddenly exclaimed Cyrus, as the door of Adele's house flew open and a figure stepped out.

The next moment the fugitive clerk stepped into the shadow of a cabin, and kept his eyes on the person who had appeared so unexpectedly.

"Halt!" rung out on the air in the sternest of tones from a spot behind the clerk's station, and the person who had emerged from Burt Browne's stopped in his tracks.

"Don't draw, Andros Ruby," continued the voice. "This is not Wild Alaric's trap. I lost you there, you know. I shall now deal with the last man of the New York gang."

Andros Ruby! The name almost flew from the clerk's throat in wild accents; he felt like taking to his heels like a deer; indeed he did start, but a hand from within the same shadow that screened him dropped upon his shoulder, and he looked into a pair of eyes that had a merciless glare.

"Not a step!" said a voice at the youth's side. "Stay here and see the long game played out. The iron blades have met on the same field and theirs is a common foe."

Cyrus Slinkum turned his attention to the two men standing scarcely ten feet apart in the brilliant star-light. The hand of the man who had just left the cabin rested on the butt of a revolver half drawn while the six-shooter of the other covered him completely.

"I am Fred Ferret once more!" said the last-named man. "I am the Broadway detective who by your orders was run down by your men, and walled up in Mother Redbird's trap. You are the last member of that infamous gang, Andros Ruby. I have found you by accident to night, but I shall make none the less certain my revenge. You have just come from Adele's home. Heaven knows in what condition you have left the only child of the man you and your gang killed that memorable night in Gotham. Look over my revolver into the eyes that rejoice that they have found you. This is not Alaric's trap to which Mark Delancey was decoyed by a letter and a map. This is Coyote, and we stand under the stars that shall witness the last hand played in this red game. It would do Mark good to play it but his iron dagger has accomplished all the work it will ever do. No-

body knows where he is. If he is on your trail, he will find you after I have avenged the black past. Are you ready, Andros Ruby? I count five for you!"

The Sport of Two Cities, thus faced by the Broadway Spotter, seemed to increase an inch in stature.

"Touch your trigger, Fred Ferret," he said, fiercely. "It was Alaric's fault that you are here. Press your trigger, I say, and then look into the cabin behind me."

"Which means that you have killed Adele?"

"Go and see!"

At that moment the man beside Cyrus Slinkum took one step forward, and reached the edge of the shadow.

The hotel clerk saw a knife-like object in his hand, which was suddenly lifted above his head.

"One—two—" began the Broadway Spotter behind his weapon; "three—four—"

All at once something that had no glitter left the hand of the man in the cabin's shadow. It went through the air like an arrow and struck with a thud, that drew forth a wild cry!

It was the iron blade again!

Andros Ruby had not time to throw up his hand, and the first intimation that Fred Ferret had of the flight of the dagger was the outlaw's cry and his sudden recoil!

"Too late, Mr. Ferret," said the clerk's companion. "After this, when you see an enemy, shoot him on sight."

"Mark Delancey!"

In the brilliant starlight stood the handsome man whose hand had thrown the dagger straight at the human target.

Andros Ruby had already struck the ground, his career ended within a few feet of his last infamous crime.

Mark Delancey looked once at him as he sprung toward the cabin, and in a moment he was beyond the threshold. The interior of the place was dark, but a light soon illumined it.

Fred Ferret had also reached the spot, and was the first to give utterance to a startling cry.

"Dead! the last crime of Andros Ruby is his foulest. He has killed Adele!"

Mark Delancey, who had lifted the form of the girl from the floor, made no reply, but his compressed lips and flashing eyes told his feelings.

He bore the girl to the light and looked anxiously into her face for several moments.

"What's the verdict?" asked the young detective.

"There's life here yet!"

"Thank Heaven!"

Mark Delancey looked up into Ferret's face.

"Go out and look at the last man," he said.

"I may have failed to hit his heart, but I think not."

The Broadway Spotter departed, and as he left the cabin he saw a human figure bending over Andros Ruby. In a second he was there.

"Is this your work, Fred Ferret?" cried the person springing up and drawing a revolver before the detective.

"Not mine, but I rejoice in it all the same!" was the reply.

"This man was my friend and—"

"Friend?" interrupted Ferret as his hand grasped the speaker's arm. "Friend did you say, Quartz Kid?"

"Yes."

"He was the bitterest enemy you ever had. Do you know the girl called Zoe in Custer?"

"I do."

"She is your sister."

"What?"

"Your sister," repeated the detective. "She is Crimson Con's child, and was stolen in 'Frisco years ago by Captain Dandy, who lies dead at your feet."

Quartz Kid looked at the desperado lying in the starlight, and then lifted his eyes mutely to the detective.

"It is true—I will prove it to you by and by. Zoe is your sister and Crimson Con was your father," said the detective.

"I have served that man!" cried the boy, pointing at the dead. "I have been his spy against Adele, and against all his hunters. I hate myself for havin' served the mountain ratter!"

It is here that we must bring our romance to a close.

Adele, it was discovered, was not fatally hurt by Andros Ruby's last clutch, and her recovery was rapid and certain.

The Sport of Two Cities having eluded his two hunters, Mark Delancey and Fred Ferret, in the cave, had returned to Coyote to strike them by taking the girl's life, but fortune had decreed that his villainy should not be successful.

The iron blades had played the game out and when Andros Ruby fell there died the head of the most desperate gang that ever infested East and West.

The infamous murder of the banker Ralph Delancey, Adele's father, had been fully avenged by his brother Mark's iron blade, and every member of the gang, save Wild Alaric, had perished by his hand.

Surely he had tracked them down to find Fred

Ferret already on their track, but he had almost entirely baffled the New York detective.

It was true that Zoe—Andros Ruby's protegee in Custer—and Quartz Kid were brother and sister, and at the reunion the boy cursed himself again for having been the villain's spy.

Cyrus Slinkum, alias Jasper Judd, was prevailed upon to go back to Custer, where he got back his old place in the hotel. After a short service, Mark Delancey took him East almost by force; there he confronted his old employers, who accepted his penitence and refused to prosecute him.

No little stir was created in Custer by the discovery that Mark the Unknown was Adele's uncle. Captain Cressy of the Vigilantes was not much surprised, for it will be recollected that he did Mark a service the night Andros Ruby caused his arrest. They were friends, and had met before.

A few months ago Adele added the closing chapter to our romance by becoming the wife of Fred Ferret, and ere long Cyrus Slinkum, who has reformed and is a rising young merchant in a Western town, will lead Quartz Kid's sister to the altar.

Gideon Goldbird never went back to Custer with a new mustache, and he never knew that the John Leopard who met him in New York when he went thither to inspect Mother Redbird's dungeons, was Fred Ferret's brother.

Mark Delancey, restless and shadowed as it seemed by his long man-hunt, has returned to India, and with him, a terrible memento of the desperate game, went the fatal iron dagger.

It had accomplished its work—the avenging of a brother's blood.

Quartz Kid is still in the Black Hills, but he is no longer anybody's spy.

He hates the memory of Andros Ruby, alias Major Blister, the cool Sport of Two Cities.

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